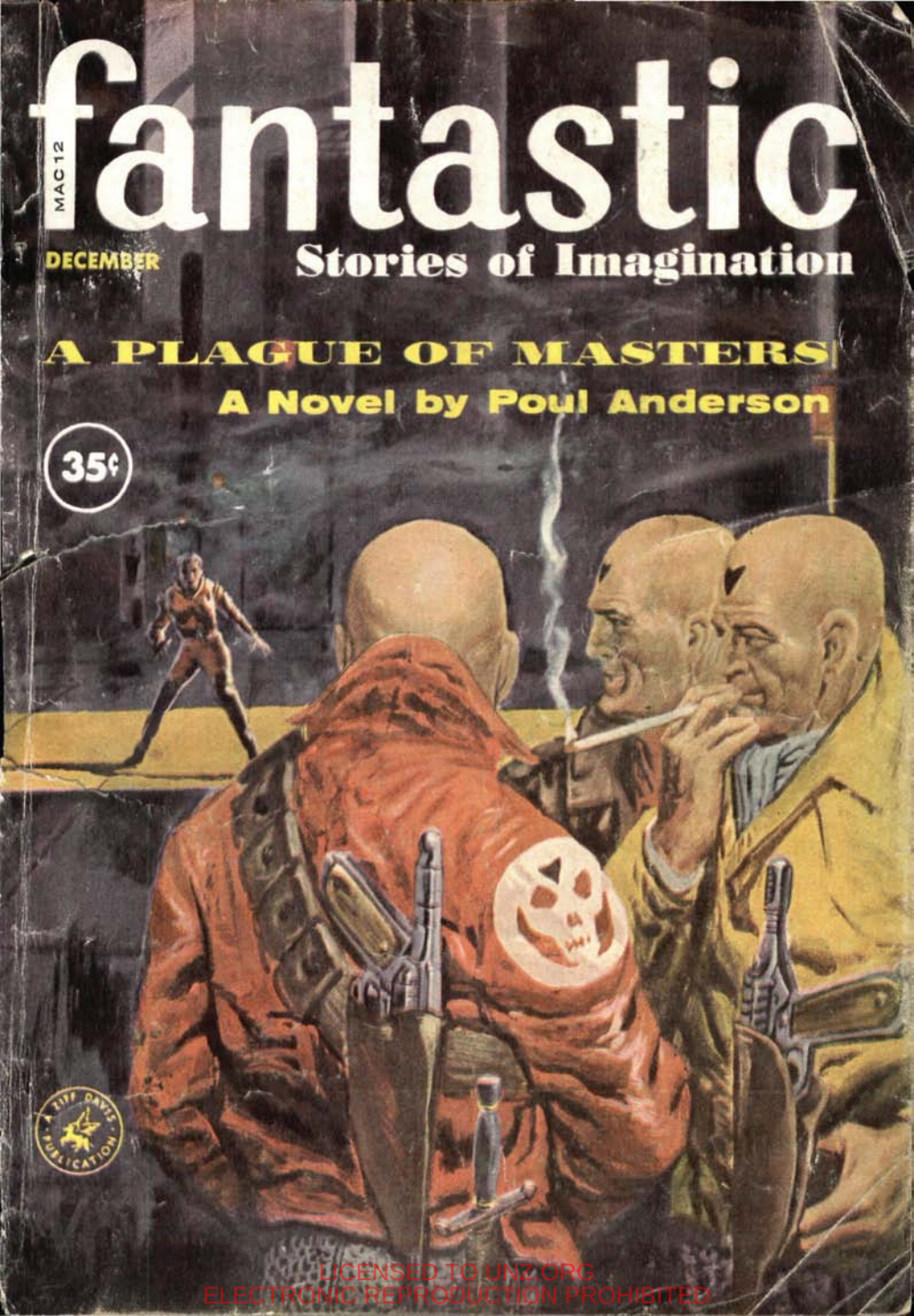

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Stories of Imagination

DECEMBER 1960

Volume 9 Number 12

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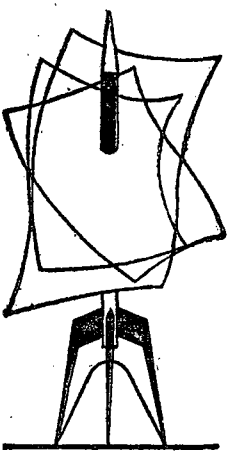

ALONG towards year-end is the traditional time for deck-clearing and summing-up, and who are we to flaunt the ancient traditions—that stock in trade of much good fantasy.

First, to clear at least one deck. There's been a good deal of response to the August editorial about personal Utopias. Much of it has appeared in "According To You." But perhaps one of the most interesting comments on both the idea and the reader response recently arrived from James E. Black, of 147 Pine Grove Drive, Orange Tex. (a contradictory address if there ever was one!) Mr. Black makes several excellent points about personal Utopias and the American tradition—worthy, we feel, of being passed along to you in space more prominent than it would be possible to devote to it in the normal reader mail section. For the next few paragraphs, therefore, Mr. Black has the floor:

"I am 36 years old (relatively young by today's standards) and, like yourself, I still have my dreams. They may be, it is true, rather childish, but they are nevertheless real to me in the sense that the things of which I dream could conceivably be made to come about. It has been a little disappointing to me, therefore, to find, as you seem to have found, that so few people still have their dreams.

"I think I first began to notice this while I was in the service during World War 2. It came as a great surprise to me to find that so few of the men I came in contact with had any (or few) personal desires, other than those which stemmed from a practical viewpoint. The one wish that I found prevalent was the desire for "a million dollars." Impractical—yes! Utopia—definitely not. No one wanted to own a yacht; no one wanted to learn to play a musical instrument; no one wanted to go deer-hunting; in fact, beyond that all-encompassing Million Dollars, no one wanted anything.

"It may well be that this attitude was a result of the times, but I am inclined to think otherwise. If it were true, then, like most everything else of those days, there would have been a gradual return to 'normal'. This does not seem to have been the case, and this brings me to another point in the same vein.

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"Have you noticed how, within the last decade, the American people have apparently lost their love of tradition?

"When I was a youngster, Memorial Day and Armistice Day were two of the greatest holidays of the year. On that day there was a surcease from labor, we put on our Sunday clothes, and everyone went to town and celebrated. Stores were closed, gas pumps were locked (if you were making a trip, you serviced the car the night before) and only amusement establishments were open.

"Such things just simply don't happen today. This year, in this city, only the banks observed Memorial Day. Now, maybe I'm old-fashioned, but this seems to indicate to me some sort of moral decay. Is there some reason why we should cease being glad that World War I officially ended on November 11, or to honor those who made it possible? I think not, but it seems I am almost alone.

"Have I got away from your 'personal Utopia' idea? I don't think so, for it seems to me that these things all have a bearing on each other. I've heard it said that those who live by tradition are romanticists, and also that a dreamer is that same romanticist. This country was partly built on tradition and partly on dreams. It's impossible to remove the cornerstone and leave the building standing.

"What is my personal Utopia? Well, I'm a hobby-ist. I'm not a 'nervous type', but I can't sit still doing nothing but think. If I really want to think, give me something to keep my hands busy, and leave me alone. Anything at all will suffice; a musical instrument, wood-working tools, a model. So, in my Utopia, I would want a comfortable home (no yacht, thank you—I get seasick), wood- and leather-working tools, photography equipment, musical instruments (a piano, a violin, and perhaps a harp would do), and plenty of books. In this Utopia, I would want only occasional visitors, and these of the serious, sober, semi-intellectual type. The only other company required would be a few friends for my wife (she's the type who likes to meet new people and keep in touch with old ones) and playmates for my children, and none of these people would notice if I chose to ignore them."

A good Utopia, Mr. Black, and within the realm both of the American dream and the American tradition. Particularly that last part—about visitors who would not mind if we chose to ignore them.

That is not only Utopian in concept, it's fantastic. May I be one of your visitors? You may ignore me at will, for I have always secretly wanted to be able to visit somebody and ignore *him*.—NL

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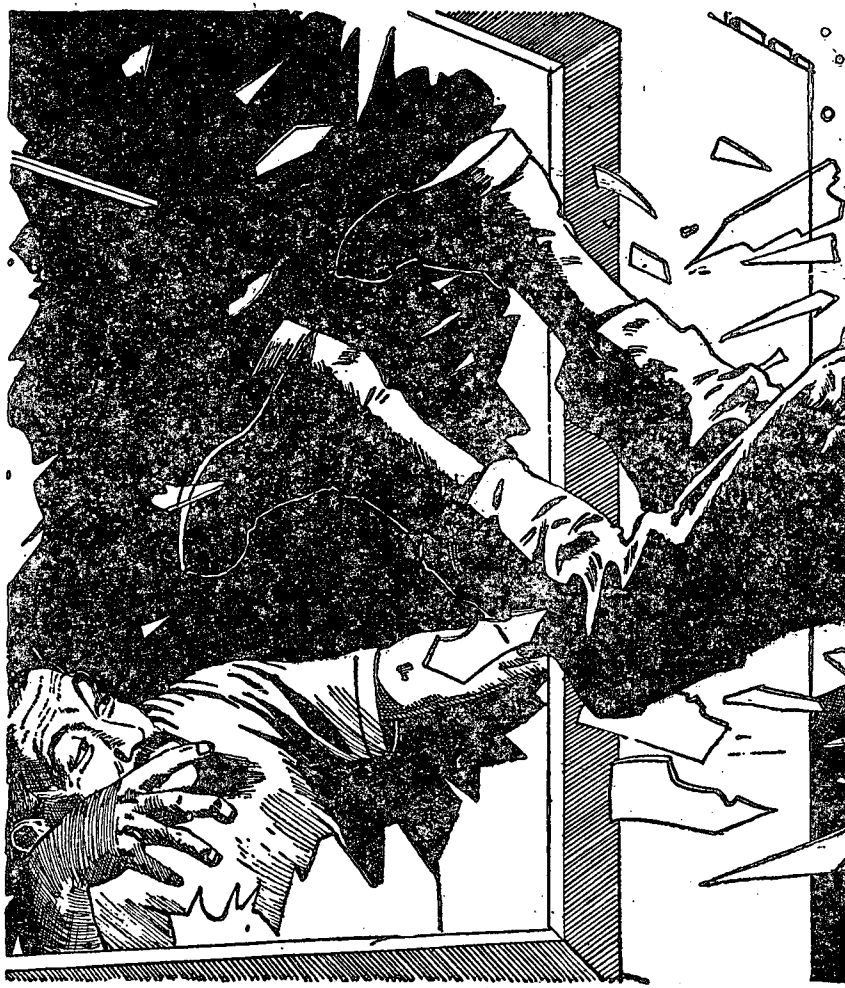
A Plague of Masters

By POUL ANDERSON

Illustrator BERNKLAU



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(Part One Of Two Parts)

FIRST he was aware of rain. Its noise filled the opened airlock chamber, a great slow roar that reverberated through the spaceship's metal. Light struck outward, glinted off big raindrops crowded together in their falling. Each globule shone quicksilver. But just beyond that curtain was total night. Here and there in blackness a lamp could be seen, and a watery glimmer reflected off the concrete under its pole. The air that gusted into the lock chamber was as warm as wet, and full of strange smells; Flandry thought some were like jasmine and some like rotting ferns, but couldn't be sure.

He tossed his cigaret to the deck and ground it under his heel. The hooded raincape which he slipped on seemed useless in such weather. *Diving suit might help,* he grumbled to himself. All

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his careful elegance had gone for naught; from the peaked cap with the sunburst of Empire, down past flowing silkite blouse and embroidered blue doublet, red sash with the fringed ends hanging just so, to sleek white trousers tucked in soft but shiny leather halfboots. He pressed a control button and descended from the lock. As he reached ground, the ladder retracted, the valve closed, lights went out in the ports of the flitter. He felt very much alone.

The rain seemed even louder here in the open. It must be striking on foliage crowding every side of the field. Flandry heard water gurgle in gutters and drains. He could make out several buildings now, across the width of concrete, and started toward them. He hadn't gone far when half a dozen men approached from that direction. *It must be the receiving committee,* he thought, and halted so that they might be the ones coming to him. Imperial prestige and so forth, what?

As they neared, he saw they were not an especially tall race. He, who was about three-fourths caucasoid, topped the biggest by half a head. But they were wide-shouldered and well-muscled, walking lithely. A nearby lamp showed them to be tawny brown of skin, with black hair banged across the forehead and falling past the ears, a tendency toward almond eyes and flattish noses. They wore a simple uniform: green pocketed kilt of waterproof synthetic, sandals on their feet, a medallion around each neck. They moved with a confident semi-military stride, and haughtiness marked the beardless faces. Yet they were armed only with truncheon and dagger.

Odd. Flandry noted the comforting weight of the blaster at his own hip.

The squad reached him and deployed. There had been another man with them. One of the squad continued to hold a gracefully shaped umbrella over this one's head. It was a head shaven smooth, with a symbol tattooed on the brow in fluorescing gold. The man was short and slender, but seemed athletic. Hard to judge his age; the face was unlined, but sharper and with more profile than the others, a sensitive mouth and disconcertingly steady eyes. He wore a robe which flared outward from the shoulders (held by a yoke, Flandry judged, to permit free air circulation around the body) and fell in simple white folds to the ankles. On its breast was the image of a star.

He regarded Flandry for several seconds before speaking, in archaic and thickly accented Anglic: "Welcome to Unan Besar. It

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is long since an . . . outsider . . . has been on this planet."

The newcomer sketched a bow and answered in Pulaoic, "On behalf of His Majesty and all the peoples of the Terran Empire, greetings to your world and yourself. I am Captain Sir Dominic Flandry of the Imperial Navy." Intelligence Corps, field division, he did not add.

"Ah. Yes." The other man seemed glad to slip back into his own language. "The dispatcher did mention to me that you spoke our tongue. You honor us by taking the trouble to learn."

Flandry shrugged. "No trouble. Neural educator, don't y' know. Doesn't take long. I got the implantation from a Betelgeusean trader on Orma, before I came here."

The language was musical, descended from Malayan but influenced by many others in the past. The ancestors of these people had left Terra to colonize New Djawa a long time ago. After the disastrous war with Gorrazan, three centuries back and a bit, some of those colonists had gone on to Unan Besar, and had been isolated from the rest of the human race ever since. Their speech had evolved along its own track.

Flandry was more interested in the reaction of the robed man. His beautifully curved lips drew taut, for just an instant, and a hand curved its fingers to claws before withdrawing into the wide sleeve. The others stood impassive, rain running off their shoulders, but their eyes never left Flandry.

The robed man exclaimed, "What were you doing on Orma? It's no planet of the Empire. We're beyond the borders of any empire!"

"More or less." Flandry made his tone careless. "Terra is a couple of hundred light-years away. But you must be aware how indefinite interstellar boundaries are—how entire hegemonies can interpenetrate. As for Orma, well, why shouldn't I be there? It has a Betelgeusean trading base, and Betelgeuse is friendly to Terra."

"The real question," said the other, hardly audible above the rainfall, "is why you should be here."

And then, relaxing, donning a smile: "But no matter. You are most welcome, Captain. Permit self-introduction. I am Nias Warouw, director of the Guard Corps of the Planetary Biocontrol."

Chief of detectives, translated Flandry. *Or . . . chief of military intelligence? Why else should the Emperor's representative—as they must figure I am—be met by a policeman rather than the head of government?*

Unless the police are *the government.*

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Warouw startled him by switching briefly to Anglic: "You might call me a physician."

Flandry decided to take things as they came. *As the tourist in the sultan's harem said.* A folk out of touch for three hundred years could be expected to develop some strange customs.

"Do you always get these rains?" He drew his cloak tighter. Not that it could prevent his collar from wilting. He thought of Terra, music, perfumed air, cocktails at the Everest House with some bit of blonde fluff, and wondered dismally why he had ever come to this sinkhole planet. It wasn't as if he had orders.

"Yes—normally, about nightfall, in these latitudes," said Warouw.

Unan Besar has a mere ten-hour rotation period, thought Flandry. *They could easily have waited another five of those hours, till their one and only spaceport came around into daylight again. I'd have been glad to stay in orbit. They kept stalling me long enough as it was; and then suddenly their damn dispatcher ordered me down on the instant. Five extra hours—why, I could have spent them cooking myself a really decent dinner, and eating it at a decent speed, instead of gobbling a sandwich. What kind of manners is this, anyhow?*

I think they wanted me to land in darkness and rain.

Why?

Warouw reached beneath his robe and took out a vial. It held some large blue pills. "Are you aware of the biochemical situation here?" he asked.

"The Betelgeuseans mentioned something about it, but they weren't too clear or thorough on the subject."

"They wouldn't be. Having a nonhuman immunochemistry, they are not affected, and thus are not very interested. But to us, Captain, the very air of this planet is toxic. You have already absorbed enough to cause death in a few days."

Warouw smiled sleepily. "Of course, we have an antitoxin," he went on. "You will need one of these pills every thirty or so of our days while remaining here, and a final dose before you leave."

Flandry gulped and reached for the vial. Warouw's movement of withdrawal was snake smooth. "Please, Captain," he murmured. "I shall be happy to give you one now. But only one at a time. It is the law, you understand. We have to keep a careful record. Can't be careless, you know."

The Terran stood motionless for what seemed a long while. At last he grinned, without much jollity. "Yes," he said, "I believe I do understand."

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II

THE spaceport was built on a hill, a hundred jungled kilometers from the planet's chief city, for the benefit of the Betelgeuseans. A few ancient Pulaoic ships were also kept at that place, but never used.

"A hermit kingdom," the blue-faced skipper had growled to Flandry in the tavern on Orma. "We don't visit them very often. Once or twice a standard year, a trading craft of ours stops by." The Betelgeuseans were ubiquitous throughout this sector of space. Flandry had engaged passage on one of their tramp ships, as the quickest way to get from his completed assignment on Altai to the big Imperial port at Spica VI. There he would catch the *Empress Maia,* which touched on the homeward leg of her regular cruise. He felt he deserved to ride back to Terra on a luxury liner, and he was an accomplished padder of expense accounts.

"What do you trade for?" he asked. It was idle curiosity, filling in time until the merchant ship departed this planet. They were speaking Alfzarian, which scratched his throat, but the other being had no Anglic.

"Hides, natural fibers, and fruits, mostly. You've never eaten *modjo* fruit? Humans in this sector think it's quite a delicacy; me, I wouldn't know. But I guess nobody ever thought to take some as far as Terra. Hm-m-m." The Betelgeusean went into a commercial reverie.

Flandry sipped raw local brandy and said, "There are still scattered independent colonies left over from the early days. I've just come from one, in fact. But I've never heard of this Unan Besar."

"Why should you? Doubtless the astronautical archives at sector HQ, even at Terra, contain mention of it. But it keeps to itself. And it's of no real importance, even to us. We sell a little machinery and stuff there; we pick up the goods I mentioned; but it amounts to very little. It could amount to more, I think, but whoever controls the planet doesn't want that."

"Are you sure?"

"It's obvious. They have one wretched little spaceport for the whole globe. Antiquated facilities, a few warehouses, all stuck way to chaos out in the woods—as if spaceships were still spewing radiation! Traders aren't permitted to go anywhere else. They aren't even furnished a bunkhouse. So naturally, they only stay long enough to discharge a consignment and load the exchange cargo. They never meet anyone except a few officials. They're not supposed to speak with the native longshoremen. Once or twice I've tried

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that, in private, just to see what would happen. Nothing did. The poor devil was so frightened that he ran. *He* knew the law!"

"Hm." Flandry rubbed his chin. Its scratchiness reminded him he was due for his bimonthly dose of antibeard enzyme, and he shifted to stroking his mustache. "I wonder they even let you learn their language."

"That happened several generations ago, when our traders first made contact. Anglic was inconvenient for both parties—Oh, yes, a few of their aristocrats know Anglic. We sell them books, newstapes, anything to keep their ruling class up to date on what's happening in the rest of the known galaxy. Maybe the common people on Unan Besar are rusticating. But the overlords are not."

"What are they doing, then?"

"I don't know. From space, you can see it's a rich world. Backward agricultural methods, odd-looking towns, but crammed with natural resources."

"What sort of planet is it? What type?"

"Terrestroid. What else?"

Flandry grimaced and puffed a cigaret to life. "You know how much that means!"

"Well, then, it's about one A.U. from its sun. But that's an F2 star, a little more massive than Sol, so the planet's sidereal period is only nine months and its average temperature is higher than Terra or Alfzar. No satellites. Very little axial tilt. About a ten-hour rotation. A trifle smaller than Terra, surface gravity oh-point-eight gee. As a consequence, fewer uplands: smaller continents, lots of islands, most areas rather low and swampy. Because of the weaker gravity and higher irradiation, it actually has less hydrosphere than Terra. But you'd never know that, what with shallow seas and heavy clouds everywhere you look. . . . Uh, yes, there's something the matter with its ecology also. I forget what, because it doesn't affect my species, but humans need to take precautions. Can't be too serious, though, or the place wouldn't have such a population. I estimate a hundred million inhabitants—and it was only colonized three centuries ago."

"Well," said Flandry, "people have to do something in their spare time."

He smoked slowly, thinking. The self-isolation of Unan Besar might mean nothing, except to its dwellers. On the other hand, he knew of places where hell's own kettle had simmered unnoticed for a long time. It was hard enough—impossible, actually—to keep watch on those four million suns estimated to lie within the Imperial sphere itself. Out

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here on the marches, where barbarism faded into unknownness, and the agents of a hostile Merseia prowled and probed, any hope of controlling all situations grew cold indeed.

Wherefore the thumb-witted guardians of a fat and fun-seeking Terra had stopped even trying, thought Flandry. They should make periodic reviews of the archives, sift every Intelligence report, investigate each of a billion mysteries. But that would require a bigger Navy, he thought, which would require higher taxes, which would deprive too many Terran lordlings of a new skycar and too many of their mistresses of a new synthagem bracelet. It might even turn up certain alarming facts on which the Navy would have to act, which might even (horrors!) lead to full-scale fighting somewhere. . . .

Ah, the devil with it, he thought. *I've just come from a mission the accounts of which, delicately exaggerated, will make me a celebrity at Home. I have several months' unspent pay waiting. And speaking of mistresses—*

But it is not natural for a human planet to cut itself off from humanity. When I get back, I'd better file a recommendation that this be checked up on.

Though I'm hardly naive enough to think that anyone will act on my bare suspicion.

"Where" said Captain Flandry, "can I rent a space flitter?"

III

THE aircar was big, modern, and luxuriously outfitted. A custom job from Betelgeuse, no doubt. Flandry sat among dead-pan Guard Corpsmen who said never a word, beside Warouw who was almost as quiet. Rain and wind were noisy as the car got under way, but when it slanted toward Kompong Timur, the weather had cleared. Flandry looked down upon a sprawling constellation of lights. He could see that the city borders faded into a broad lake, and that it was everywhere threaded with canals, which shimmered under mercury and neon glare. An experienced eye recognized certain other signs, such as the clustering of radiance near the central and tallest buildings, the surrounding zones of low roofs and infrequent lamps. That usually meant slums, which in turn suggested a concentration of wealth and power among the few.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"To an interview. The governing board of Biocontrol is most anxious to meet you, Captain." Warouw lifted one eyebrow. It gave his smooth oval face a flicker of sardonicism. "You are not

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weary, I trust? What with the short day and night here, our people have gotten into the habit of taking several naps throughout the rotation period, rather than one long rest. Perhaps you feel ready for bed?"

Flandry tapped a cigaret on one thumbnail. "Would it do me much good to say yes?"

Warouw smiled. The aircar glided down to a landing terrace, high on one of the biggest buildings—a structure important enough to have been erected on a piece of solid land, rather than on the piles driven into mud which upheld most of the city.

As Flandry stepped out, the Guards closed in around him. "Call off the Happiness Boys, will you?" he snapped. "I want a quiet smoke." Warouw jerked his head. The silent men withdrew, but not very far. Flandry walked across the terrace to its rail.

Clouds banked high on the eastern horizon. Lightning flickered in their depths. Overhead, the sky was clear, though a dim violet haze wavered among unearthly star-patterns—fluorescence in the upper atmosphere, due the hidden but brilliant sun. Flandry identified the red spark of Betelgeuse, and yellow Spica, with a certain wistfulness. God knew if he'd ever drink beer again on any planet of either. He had stumbled into something unmerciful. The realization was depressing.

This building must be a hundred meters square. It rose in many tiers, pagoda fashion, the curved roofs ending in elephant heads whose tusks were lamps. The rail beneath Flandry's hand was sculptured scaly. The dome which topped the whole enormous edifice was crested with an arrogant image: the upraised foot of some bird of prey, talons grasping at heaven. The walls were gilt, dazzling even at night. From this terrace it was a fifty-meter drop to the oily waters of a major canal. On the other side rose a line of palaces. They were airy, colonnaded structures, their roofs leaping gaily upward, their walls painted with multi-armed figures at play. Lights glowed from several; Flandry heard twanging minor-key music.

Even here, in the city's heart, he thought he could smell the surrounding jungle.

"If you please." Warouw bowed at him.

Flandry took a final drag on his cigaret and followed the other man. They went through an archway shaped like the gaping mouth of a monster and down a long red hall beyond. Several doors stood open to offices, where kilted men sat tailorwise on cushions and worked at low desks. Flandry read a few legends: Interisland Water Traffic

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Bureau, Syncretic Arbitration Board, Seismic Energy Commission—yes, this was the seat of government. Then he was in an elevator, purring downward. The corridor into which he was finally guided stretched black between whitely fluorescing pillars.

At its end, a doorway opened on a great blue room. It was almost hemispherical, with an outsize window overlooking the night of Kompong Timur. To right and left stood banks of machinery: microfiles, recorders, computers, communicators. In the center was a table, black wood inlaid with native ivory. Behind it sat the overlords of Unan Besar.

Flandry stepped closer, studying them from the camouflage of a nonchalant grin. Cross-legged on a padded bench, all twenty had shaven heads and white robes like Warouw, the same tattooed mark on their brows. It was a gold circle with a cross beneath and an arrow slanting upward. The breast insignia varied —a cogwheel, a triode circuit diagram, an integral dx, conventionalized waves and grain sheafs and thunderbolts—the heraldry of a government which at least nominally emphasized technology.

Mostly, these men were older than Nias Warouw, and not in such good physical shape. The one who sat in the middle must be the grand panjandrum, Flandry thought: a petulant fat face, and the vulture-claw sign of mastery on his robe.

Warouw had been purringly urbane, but there was no mistaking the hostility of these others. Here and there a cheek gleamed with sweat, eyes narrowed, fingers drummed the tabletop. Flandry made the muscles around his shoulderblades relax. It was no easy job, since the knife-wielding Strength Through Joy squad stood immediately behind him.

The silence stretched.

Someone had to break it. "Boo," said Flandry.

The man at the center stirred. "What?"

"A formula of greeting, your prominence," bowed Flandry.

"Address me as Tuan Solu Bandang." The fat man switched eyes toward Warouw. "Is this the, ah, the Terran agent?"

"No," snorted Flandry, "I'm a cigar salesman." But he didn't snort it very loudly, or in Pulaoic.

"Yes, Tuan." Warouw inclined his head briefly above folded hands.

They continued to stare. Flandry beamed and pirouetted for them. He was worth looking at, he assured himself smugly, being of athletic build (thanks to calisthenics, which he loathed but forced himself to keep up) and

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high-boned, straight-nosed, aristocratic features (thanks to one of Terra's most fashionable biosculptors). His eyes were gray, his brown hair cut close about the ears in Imperial style but sleek on top.

Bandang pointed uneasily. "Take that, ah, gun from him," he ordered.

"Please, Tuan," said Flandry. "It was bequeathed me by my dear old grandmother. It still smells of lavender. If anyone demanded it from me, my heart would be so broken I'd blow his guts out."

Someone else turned purple and said shrilly, "You foreigner, do you realize where you are?"

"Let him keep it if he insists, Tuan," said Warouw indifferently. He met Flandry's gaze with the faintest of smiles and added:

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"We should not disfigure this reunion moment with quarrels."

A sigh went down the long table. Bandang pointed to a cushion on the floor. "Sit."

"No, thank you." Flandry studied them. Warouw seemed the most intelligent and formidable of the lot, but after their initial surprise, they had all settled back into a disquieting habitual scornfulness. Surely the only firearm in the whole room didn't count for that little!

"As you wish." Bandang leaned forward, assuming unctuousness. "See here, ah, Captain—you'll understand, I trust, how . . . how . . . delicate? Yes, how delicate a matter this is. I'm, ah, sure your discretion—" His voice trailed off in a smirk.

"If I'm causing any trouble, Tuan, I apologize," said Flandry. "I'll be glad to depart at once." *And how!*

"Ah . . . no. No, I fear that isn't, er, practicable. Not for the present. My implication is quite simple, actually, and I, ah, have no doubt that a man of your obvious sophistication can, er, grasp?—yes, can grasp the situation." Bandang drew a long breath. His colleagues looked resigned. "Consider this planet, Captain: its people, its culture, isolated and autonomous for more than four hundred years." (That would be local years, Flandry reminded himself, but still, a long time.) "The, ah, distinctive civilization which has inevitably developed—the special values, beliefs, customs, ah, and . . . achievements—the socio-economic balance—cannot lightly be upset. Not without, er, great suffering. And loss. Irreparable loss."

Having an inside view of the Empire, and unprejudiced eyes, Flandry could understand the reluctance of some worlds to have anything to do with same. But there was more here than a simple desire to preserve independence and dignity. If these characters had any knowledge at all of what was going on elsewhere in the universe—and certainly they did—then they would know that Terra wasn't a menace to them. The Empire was old and sated; except when driven by military necessity, it didn't want any more real estate. Something big and ugly was being kept hidden on Unan Besar.

"What we, ah, wish to know," continued Bandang, "is, er, do you come here with official standing? And if so, what message do you convey from your, um, respected superiors?"

Flandry weighed his answer, thinking of knives at his back and night beyond the windows. "I have no message, Tuan, other than friendly greetings," he said. "What else can the Imperium offer, until we are able to get

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to know your people better?"

"But you *have* come here under orders, Captain? Not by chance?"

"My credentials are in my spaceship, Tuan." Flandry hoped his commission, his field agent's open warrant, and similar flashy documents might impress them. For an unofficial visitor could end up in a canal with his throat cut, and no one in all the galactic vastness would care.

"Credentials for what?" It was a nervous croak from the end of the table.

Warouw scowled. Flandry could sympathize with the Guard chief's annoyance. This was no way to conduct an interrogation. Biocontrol was falling all over its own flat feet: crude bluster and cruder insinuation. To be sure, they were amateurs at this job—Warouw was their tame professional—but the lowest-echelon politician in the Empire would have had more understanding of men, and made a better attempt at questioning such a quasi-prisoner.

"If the Tuan pleases," Warouw interposed, "we seem to be giving Captain Flandry an unfortunate impression of ourselves. May my unworthy self be permitted to discuss the situation with him privately?"

"No!" Bandang stuck his head forward, like a flabby bull. "Let's have none of your shilly-shally. I'm a man of few words, yes, few words and—Captain, I, ah, trust you'll realize . . . will not take offense . . . we bear responsibility for an entire planet and—ah—well, as a man of sophistication, you will not object to narcosynthesis?"

Flandry stiffened. "What?"

"After all—" Bandang wet his lips. "You come unheralded . . . ah . . . without the expected, er, preliminary fanfare or— Conceivably you are a mere impostor. Please! Please do not resent my, um, necessary entertaining of the possibility. If you actually are an official, ah, delegate—or agent—naturally, we will wish to ascertain—"

"Sorry, Tuan," said Flandry. "I've been immunized to truth drugs."

"Oh? Oh. Oh, yes. Well, then . . . we do have a hypnoprobe—yes, Colleague Warouw's department is not altogether behind the times. He obtains goods on order from the Betelgeuseans. . . . Ah, I realize that a hypnoprobing is, er, an uncomfortable experience—"

To put it mildly, thought the Terran. His spine crawled. *I see. They really are amateurs. Nobody who understood politics and war would be so reckless. Mind-probing an Imperial officer! As if the Empire could let anyone live who heard me spill half of*

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what I know! Yes, amateurs.

He stared into the eyes of Warouw, the only man who might realize what this meant. And he met no pity, only a hunter's wariness. He could guess Warouw's calculations:

If Flandry has chanced by unofficially, on his own, it's simple. We kill him. If he's here as an advance scout, it becomes more complicated. His "accidental" death must be very carefully faked. But at least we'll know that Terra is interested in us, and can start taking measures to protect our great secret.

The worst of it was, they would learn that this visit had indeed been Flandry's own idea, and that if he died on Unan Besar a preoccupied Service wouldn't make any serious investigation.

Flandry thought of wines and women and adventures yet to be undertaken. Death was the ultimate dullness.

He dropped a hand to his blaster. "I wouldn't try that, sonny boy," he said.

From the corner of an eye, he saw one of the Guards glide forward with a raised truncheon. He sidestepped, hooked a foot before the man's ankles, shoved, and clipped behind the ear with his free hand as the body fell. The Guard hit the floor and stayed there.

His comrades growled. Knives flashed clear. "Stop!" yelled an appalled Bandang. "Stop this instant!" But it was Warouw's sharp whistle, like a man calling a dog to heel, which brought the Guards crouching in their tracks.

"Enough," said Warouw. "Put that toy away, Flandry."

"But it's a useful toy." The Terran skinned teeth in a grin. "I can kill things with it."

"What good would that do you? You would never get off this planet. And in thirty days—two Terrestrial weeks, more or less— Watch."

Ignoring stunned governors and angry Guards, Warouw crossed the floor to a telecom screen. He twirled the dials. Breath wheezed from the Biocontrol table; otherwise the room grew very quiet.

"It so happens that a condemned criminal is on public exhibition in the Square of the Four Gods." Warouw flicked a switch. "Understand, we are not inhuman. Ordinary crime is punished less drastically. But this man is guilty of assault on a Biocontrol technician. He reached the state of readiness for display a few hours ago."

The screen lit up. Flandry saw an image of a plaza surrounded by canal water. A statue loomed in each corner, male figures dancing with many arms radiating from their shoulders. In the

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middle stood a cage. A placard on it described the offense. A naked man lay within.

His back arched, he clawed the air and screamed. It was as if his ribs must break with the violence of breath and heartbeat. Blood trickled out of his nose. His jaw had dislocated itself. His eyes were blind balls starting from the sockets.

"It will progress," said Warouw dispassionately. "Death in a few more hours."

From the middle of nightmare, Flandry said, "You took his pills away."

Warouw turned down the dreadful shrieking and corrected: "No, we merely condemned him not to receive any more. Of course, an occasional criminal under the ban prefers to commit suicide. This man gave himself up, hoping to be sentenced to enslavement. But his offense was too great. Human life on Unan Besar depends on Biocontrol, which must therefore be inviolable."

Flandry took his eyes from the screen. He had thought he was tough, but this was impossible to watch. "What's the cause of death?" he asked without tone.

"Well, fundamentally the life which evolved on Unan Besar is terrestroid, and nourishing to man. But there is one phylum of airborne bacteria that occurs everywhere on the planet. The germs enter the human bloodstream, where they react with certain enzymes normal and necessary to us and start excreting acetylcholine. You know what an overly high concentration of acetylcholine does to the nervous system."

"Yes."

"Unan Besar could not be colonized until scientists from the mother planet, New Djawa, had developed an antitoxin. The manufacture and distribution of this antitoxin is the responsibility of Biocontrol."

Flandry looked at the faces behind the table. "What happens to me in thirty days," he said, "would not give you gentlemen much satisfaction."

Warouw switched off the telecom. "You might kill a few of us before the Guards overcame you," he said. "But no member of Biocontrol fears death."

Bandang's sweating countenance belied him. But others looked grim, and a fanatic's voice whispered from age-withered lips: "No, not as long as the holly mission exists."

Warouw extended his hand. "So give me that gun," he finished, almost lightly.

Flandry fired.

Bandang squealed and dove under the table. But the blaster bolt had gone by him anyway. It smote the window. Thunder crackled behind it.

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"You *fool!*" shouted Warouw.

Flandry plunged across the floor. A Guard ran to intercept him. Flandry stiff-armed the man and sprang to the tabletop. An overlord grabbed at him. Teeth crunched under Flandry's boot. He leapfrogged a bald head and hit the floor beyond.

A thrown dagger went past his cheek. The broken window gaped before him. He sprang through the hole and hit the roof underneath. It slanted steeply downward. He rolled all the way, tumbled from the edge, and straightened out as he fell toward the canal.

IV

THE water was dirty. As he broke its surface, he wondered for one idiotic moment what the chances were of salvaging his clothes. They had cost him a pretty sum. Then alien smells filled his nostrils, and he struck out in search of darkness.

Dreamlike in this hunted moment, a boat glided past. Its stem and stern curved upward, extravagantly shaped, and the sides were gay with tiny electric lamps. A boy and girl snuggled in the waist under a transparent canopy. Their kilts and Dutch boy bob seemed the universal style here for both sexes, but they had added bangles and had painted intricate designs on their skins. Music caterwauled from a radio. Rich kids, no doubt. Flandry sank back under water as the boat came near. He felt its propeller vibrations in ears and flesh.

When his head came up again, he heard a new sound. It was like a monstrous gong, crashing from some loudspeaker on the golden pagoda. An alarm! Warouw's corps would be after him in minutes. Solu Bandang might be content to wait, expecting the Terran to die in two weeks—but Nias Warouw wanted to quiz him. Flandry kicked off his boots and began swimming faster.

Lights blazed overhead at the intersection of the next canal. Every one seemed focused on him. There was a thick traffic of boats, not only pleasure craft but water buses and freight carriers. Pedestrians crowded the narrow walks that ran along the housefronts, and the high bridges crossing the waterways. The air was full of city babble. Flandry eased up against the weed-grown brick of an embankment.

Four young men stood on the walk opposite. They were muscular, the look of illiterate commoners in their mannerisms and the coarse material of their kilts. But they talked with animation, gesturing, possibly a little drunk. Another man approached. He was a small fellow, distinguished only by robe and shaven pate. But the four big ones grew still

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the moment they saw him. They backed against the wall to let him go by and bent their heads over folded hands. He paid no attention. When he was gone, it took them a few minutes to regain their good humor.

So, thought Flandry.

The chance he had been waiting for came, a freightboat putt-putting close to the canal bank in the direction he wanted. Flandry pushed away from the bricks, seized a rope bumper hung from the rail, and snuggled close to the hull. Water streamed silkily around his body and trailing legs. He caught smells of tar and spice. Somewhere above, the steersman tapped a gamelan and crooned to himself.

Within two kilometers, the boat reached an invisible boundary common to most cities. On one side of a cross-canal, an upper-class apartment house lifted tiers of delicate red columns toward a gilt roof. On the other side there was no solid land, only endless pilings to hold structures above the water. There the lamps were few, with darknesses between, and the buildings crouched low. Flandry could just see that those warehouses and tenements and small factories were not plastifaced like the rich part of town. This was all sheet metal and rough timber, thatch roofs, dim light glowing through little dirty-paned windows. He saw two men pad by with knives in their hands.

The truckboat continued, deeper into slum. Now that the great gong was stilled and the heavy traffic left behind, it was very quiet around Flandry. He heard only a muted background growl of distant machines. But if the canals had been dirty before, they were now disgusting. Once something brushed him in the night; with skin and nose he recognized it as a corpse. Once, far off, a woman screamed. And once he glimpsed a little girl, skipping rope all alone under a canalside lamp. Its harsh blue glow was as solitary as a star. Darkness enclosed the child. She didn't stop jumping as the boat passed, but her eyes followed it with a hag's calculation. Then Flandry was beyond her and had lost her.

About time to get off, the thought.

Suddenly the stillness and desertion were broken. It began as a faint irregular hooting, which drew closer. Flandry didn't know what warned him—perhaps the way the truck pilot stopped musicking and revved up the motor. But his nerves tingled and he knew: *School's out.*

He let go the bumper. The boat chugged on in haste, rounded a corner and was gone. Flandry swam through warm slimy wa-

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ter till he grasped a ladder. It led up to a boardwalk, which fronted a line of sleazy houses with tin sides and peaked grass roofs and lightless windows. The night was thick and hot and stinking around him, full of shadows. No other human stirred. But the animal hooting came nearer.

After a moment, their hides agleam in the light of one lamp twenty meters away, the pack swam into sight. There were a dozen, about the size and build of Terrestrial sea lions. They had glabrous reptile skins, long necks and snaky heads. Tongues vibrated between rows of teeth. Tasting the water? Flandry didn't know how they had traced him. He crouched on the ladder, the canal lapping about his ankles, and drew his gun.

The swimmers saw him, or smelled him, and veered. Their high blasts of sound became a shrill ululation. *Give tongue, the fox is gone to earth!*

As the nearest of them surged close, Flandry's blaster fired. Blue lightning spat in the dark, and a headless body rolled over. He scrambled up onto the walk.

The beasts kept pace as he ran, reaching up to snap at his feet. The planks resounded. He fired again, and missed. Once he stumbled, hit a corrugated metal wall, and heard it boom.

Far down the canal, engines whined and the fierce sun of a searchlight waxed in his eyes. He didn't need to be told it was a police boat, tracking him with the help of the swimmers. He stopped before a doorway. The animals churned the water below the pier. He felt its piles tremble from the impact of heavy bodies. Their splashing and whistling filled his skull. Where to go, what to do?—Yes. He turned the primitive doorknob. Locked, of course. He thumbed his blaster to narrow beam and used it as a cutting torch, with his body between the flame and the approaching speedboat.

There! The door opened under his pressure. He slipped through, closed it, and stood in the dark. An after-image of the gunbeam still flickered across his blindness, and his pulse was loud.

Got to get out of here, he thought. *The cops won't know offhand precisely where I went, but they'll check every door in this row and find the cut lock.*

He could just make out a gray square of window across the room, and groped toward it. Canal water dripped off his clothes.

Feet pattered on bare boards. "Who goes?" A moment later, Flandry swore at himself for having spoken. But there was no answer. Whoever else was in this room—probably asleep till he came—was reacting to his intrusion with feline presence of

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mind. There was no more noise.

He barked his shins on a low bedstead. He heard a creak and saw an oblong of dull shimmering light appear. A trapdoor in the floor had been opened. "Stop!" he called. The trapdoor was darkened with a shadow. Then that was gone too. Flandry heard a splash below. He thought he heard the unknown start swimming quickly away. The trapdoor fell down again.

It had all taken a bare few seconds. He grew aware of the animals, hooting and plunging outside. The unknown had nerve, to dive into the same water as that hell-pack! And now engine-roar slowed to a whine, a sputter, the boat had arrived. A voice called something, harsh and authoritative.

Flandry's eyes were adapting. He could see that this house—cabin, rather—comprised a single big room. It was sparsely furnished: a few stools and cushions, the bed, a brazier and some cooking utensils, a small chest of drawers. But he sensed good taste. There were a couple of exquisitely arabesqued wooden screens; and he thought he could identify fine drawing on a scroll which decorated one wall.

Not that it mattered! He stepped to the window on the side through which he had come. Several Guards crouched in the boat, flashing its searchlight around. A needle gun was mounted on its prow, but otherwise the men were armed only with their knives and nightsticks. There might be another boatload along soon, but for the moment—

Flandry set his blaster to full power, narrow beam, and opened the door a crack. *I couldn't get more than one or two men at this range,* he calculated, *and the others would radio HQ that they'd found me. But could be I can forestall that with some accurate shooting. Very accurate. Fortunately, I count marksmanship among my many superiorities.*

The weapon blazed.

He chopped the ion beam down, first across cockpit and dashboard to knock out the radio, then into the hull itself. The Guards bellowed. Their searchlight swung blindingly toward him and he heard needles thunk into the door panels. Then the boat was pierced. It filled and sank like a diving whale.

The Guards had already sprung overboard. They could come up the ladder, dash at their quarry, and be shot down. Wherefore they would not come very fast. They'd most likely swim around waiting for reinforcements. Flandry closed the door with a polite *"Auf Wiedersehen"* and hurried across the room. There was no door on that side, but he opened a window,

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vaulted to the boardwalk beneath, and loped off fast and quietly. With any luck, he'd leave men and seal-hounds milling about under the place he'd just quitted until he was safely elsewhere.

At the end of the pier, a bridge arched across to another row of shacks. It wasn't one of the beautiful metallic affairs in the center part of town. This bridge was of planks suspended from vine cables. But it had a grace of its own. It swayed under Flandry's tread. He passed the big pillars anchoring the suspension at the other end—

One brawny arm closed around his neck. The other hand clamped numbingly on his gun wrist. A bass voice told him, very low, "Don't move, outlander. Not till Kemul says you can."

Flandry, who didn't wish a fractured larynx, stood deathstill. The blaster was plucked from his hand. "Always wanted one of these," the mugger chuckled. "Now, who in the name of fifty million devils are you, and what d' you mean breaking into Luang's crib that way?"

The pressure tightened around his throat. Flandry thought in bitterness, *Sure, I get it. Luang escaped down the trap and fetched help. They figured I'd have to come in this direction, if I escaped at all. I seemed worth catching. This ape simply lurked behind the pillar waiting for me.*

"Come, now." The arm cut off all breath. "Be good and tell Kemul." Pressure eased a trifle.

"Guards—Biocontrol agents—back there," rattled Flandry.

"Kemul knows. Kemul isn't blind or deaf. A good citizen should hail them and turn you over to them. Perhaps Kemul will. But he is curious. No one like you has ever been seen on all Unan Besar. Kemul would like to hear your side of the tale before he decides what to do."

Flandry relaxed against a bare chest solid as a wall. "This is hardly the place for long stories," he whispered. "If we could go somewhere and talk—"

"Aye. If you will behave." Having tucked the blaster in his kilt, Kemul patted Flandry in search of other goods. He removed watch and wallet, released the Terran, and stepped back, tigerishly fast, ready for counterattack.

Vague greasy light fell across him. Flandry saw a giant by the standards of any planet, an ogre among these folk: 220 centimeters high, with shoulders to match. Kemul's face had from time to time been slashed with knives and beaten with blunt instruments; his hair was grizzled; but still he moved as if made of rubber. He wore body paint that wove a dozen clashing colors together. A kris was thrust in the

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garish batik of his kilt.

He grinned. It made his ruined countenance almost human. "Kemul knows a private spot," he offered. "We can go there if you really want to talk. But so private is it, even the house god wears a blindfold. Kemul must blindfold you too."

Flandry massaged his aching neck. "As you will." He studied the other man a moment before adding, "I had hoped to find someone like you."

Which was true enough. But he hadn't expected to meet Kompong Timur's underworld at such a severe disadvantage. If he couldn't think of something to bribe them with—his blaster had been the best possibility, and it was gone now—they'd quite likely slit his weasand. Or turn him over to Warouw. Or just leave him to die screaming, a couple of weeks hence.

V

BOATS clustered around a long two-story building which stood by itself in the Canal of the Fiery Snake. Everywhere else lay darkness, the tenements of the poor, a few sweatshop factories, old warehouses abandoned to rats and robbers. But there was life enough on the first floor of the Tavern Called Swampman's Ease. Its air was thick with smoke, through which grinned jack-o'-lantern lights, and with the smells of cheap arrack and cheaper narcotics. Freightboat crewmen, fishers, dock wallopers, machine tenders, hunters and loggers from the jungle, bandits, cutpurses, gamblers, and less identifiable persons lounged about on the floor mats: drinking, smoking, quarreling, plotting, rattling dice, watching a dancer swing her hips to plang of gamelan and squeal of flute and thump-thump of a small drum. Occasionally, behind a beaded curtain, one of the joy girls giggled. High on her throne, Madame Udjung watched with jet eyes nearly buried in fat. Sometimes she spoke to the noseless daggerman who crouched at her feet in case of trouble, but mostly she drank gin and talked to the ketjil bird on her wrist. It was not large, but its tail swept down like a rain of golden fire and it could sing in a woman's voice.

Flandry could hear enough of the racket to know he was in some such place. But there were probably a hundred like it, and his eyes had only been unbandaged when he reached this second-floor room. Which was *not* the sort of layout he would have expected. It was clean, and much like the one he'd blundered onto earlier: simple furnishings, a decorative scroll, a couple of screens, a shallow bowl holding

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one stone and two white flowers. A glowlamp in the hand of a small, blindfolded wooden idol on a shelf showed that every article was of exquisite simplicity. One window stood open to warm breezes, but incense drowned the garbage smell of the canal.

Kemul tossed Flandry a kilt, which the Terran was glad enough to belt around his middle. "Well," said the giant, "what are his things worth after they've been cleaned, Luang?"

The girl studied the clothes Flandry had been forced to take off. "All synthetic fiber . . . but never have color and fineness like this been seen on Unan Besar." Her voice was husky. "I should say they are worth death in the cage, Kemul."

"What?"

Luang threw the garments to the floor and laughed. She sat on top of the dresser, swinging bare feet against its drawers. Her kilt was dazzling white, her only ornament the ivory inlay on her dagger hilt. Not that she needed more. She wasn't tall, and her face had never been sculpted into the monotonous beauty of all rich Terran women. But it was a vivid face, high cheekbones, full mouth, delicately shaped nose, eyes long and dark under arched brows. Her bobbed hair was crow's-wing color, her complexion dull gold, and her figure reminded Flandry acutely that he had been celibate for months.

"Reason it out, mugger," she said with a note of affectionate teasing. She took a cigaret case from her pocket and offered it to the Terran. Flandry accepted a yellow cylinder and inhaled. Nothing happened. Luang laughed again and snapped a lighter for him and herself. She trickled smoke from her nostrils, as if veiling her expression. Flandry tried it and choked. If this was tobacco, then tobacco on Unan Besar had mutated and crossed itself with deadly nightshade.

"Well, Captain, as you style yourself," said Luang, "what do you suggest we do with you?"

Flandry regarded her closely, wishing the local costume weren't quite so brief. Dammit, his life depended on cool thinking. "You might try listening to me," he said.

"I am. Though anyone who breaks in on my rest as you did—"

"I couldn't help that!"

"Oh, the trouble you caused isn't held against you." Luang raised her feet to the dresser top, hugged her legs and watched him across rounded knees. "On the contrary, I haven't had so much fun since One-Eyed Rawi went amok down on Joy Canal. How those fat frumps squealed

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—and dove into the water in all their finery!" Malice faded and she sighed. "It ended unhappily, though, when poor old Rawi must needs be killed. I hope this adventure doesn't end likewise."

"I hope so too," Flandry agreed. "Let's work together very hard to prevent any such outcome."

Kemul, who was hunkered on the floor, snapped his fingers. "Ah! Kemul understands!"

She smiled. "What do you mean?"

"About his clothes and other valuables. They would be noticed, Luang, and Biocontrol would ask questions, and might even trace them back to us. And if it turned out we had failed to give Biocontrol this man they were hunting, it would be the cage for both of us."

"Congratulations," said Flandry.

"Best we surrender him at once." Kemul shifted uneasily on his haunches. "There might even be a reward."

"We shall see." Luang inhaled thoughtfully—and, to the Terran, most distractingly. "Of course," she mused, "I had best go back to my other place soon. The Guard Corps must be swarming all over it. They'll establish my identity from fingerprints." She looked at Flandry through drooping lashes. "I *could* tell them that when you broke in, I was frightened and escaped through the trap and don't know anything about the affair."

He leaned against the wall near the window. It was very dark outside. "But I have to make it worth your while to take the risk they won't believe you, eh?" he said.

She made a face. "Poo! That's no risk. Whoever heard of a Guard able to think past the end of his own snout? The real danger would come later, in keeping you hidden, outworld man. Swamp Town is full of eyes. It would be expensive, too."

"Let's discuss the matter." Flandry took another puff of his cigaret. It wasn't so bad the second time; probably his taste buds were stunned. "Let's get acquainted, at least. I've told you I'm an Imperial officer, and explained a little of what and where the Empire is nowadays. So let me learn something about your own planet. Check my deductions against the facts for me, will you?

"Biocontrol manufactures the antitoxin pills and distributes them through local centers, right?" She nodded. "Every citizen gets one, every thirty days, and has to swallow it there on the spot." Again she nodded. "Obviously, even infants must have a ration in their milk. So every person on this world can

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be fingerprinted at birth. The prints are kept in a central file, and automatically checked every time anyone comes in for his pill. Thus no one gets more than his ration. And anybody in trouble with the law had better surrender very meekly to the Guards . . . or he won't get the next dose." This time her nod included a faint, derisive smile.

"No system ever worked so well that there wasn't some equivalent of an underworld," Flandry continued. "When the authorities began to get nasty, I struck out for the slums, where I figured your criminal class must center. Evidently I was right about that. What I don't yet know, though, is why as much freedom as this is allowed. Kemul, for example, seems to be a full-time bandit; and you, m' lady, appear to be a, ahem, private entrepreneur. The government could control your people more tightly than it does."

Kemul laughed, a gusty noise overriding that mumble and tinkle which seeped through the floorboards. "What does Biocontrol care?" he said. "You pay for your medicine. You pay plenty, each time. Oh, they make some allowance for hardship cases, where such can be proven, but that puts you right under the Guards' nosy eye—" *Wow!* thought Flandry. "Or a slave owner get a reduction on the pills he buys for his folk. Bah! Kemul would rather slash his own belly like a free man. So he pays full price. Most people do. So Biocontrol gets its money. How that money is earned in the first place, Biocontrol doesn't care."

"Ah." Flandry stroked his mustache. "A single tax system."

The socio-economics of it became obvious enough now. If every person, with insignificant exceptions, had to pay the same price for life every two weeks, certain classes were placed at a severe disadvantage. Men with large families, for example: they'd tend to put the kids to work as young as possible, to help meet the bills. This would mean an ill-educated younger generation, still less able to maintain its place on the economic ladder. Poor people generally would suffer; any run of hard luck would land them in the grip of the loan sharks for life. The incentive toward crime was enormous, especially when there was no real policing.

Over lifetimes, the rich got richer and the poor got poorer. At last a small class of billionaires—merchants, big manufacturers and landholders—lorded it over a beaten-down peasantry and a turbulent city proletariat. These distinctions became he-

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reditary, simply because no one ever got far enough ahead to rise above his father's status. . . . If there had been contact with other planets, the necessities of interstellar competition would have forced Unan Besar into a more efficient pattern. But except for the occasional unimportant visit of a strictly segregated Betelgeusean trader, Unan Besar had been isolated these past three centuries.

Flandry realized he was oversimplifying. A planet is a world, as big and diverse as ever Terra was. There had to be more than one social structure, and within any sub-culture there must be individuals who didn't fit the pattern. Luang, for instance; he didn't know quite what to make of her. But no matter for now. He was in Kompong Timur, where life was approximately as he had deduced.

"I take it, then, that failure to respect Biocontrol personnel is the only serious crime here," he said.

"Not quite." Kemul's fist clenched. "Biocontrol is chummy with the rich. Burgle a rich man's house and see what happens. Ten years in the quarries, if you're lucky. Enslavement, more likely."

"Only if you are caught," purred Luang. "I remember once— But that was then."

"I see why Guards don't bother carrying firearms," said Flandry.

"They do in this section of town." Kemul looked still grimmer. "And they go in teams. And still they're apt to end up floating in the canal, with none to say who did it to them. So many people might, you see. Not so much for the money they have. But might be a husband, after some rich boy come slumming saw his wife and ordered her aboard his boat. Or a palace servant, whipped once too often. Or a sometime engineer, what lost his post and sank down to our level, because he'd not wink at a defective load of cement. Cases like that."

"He speaks of people he knows," said Luang. "He hasn't imagination enough to invent examples." Her tone remained bantering.

"But most times," Kemul finished doggedly, "the Guards don't come into Swamp Town. No reason for it. We buy our pills and stay out of the palace section. What we do to each other, nobody cares."

"Have you never thought of —" Flandry groped in his Pulaoic vocabulary, but couldn't find any word for revolution. "You commoners and paupers outnumber the ruling class. You have weapons, here and there. You could take over, you know."

Kemul blinked. Finally he

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spat. "Ah, what use has Kemul for fancy eats and a fancy harem? Kemul does well enough."

Luang caught Flandry's real meaning. He saw that she was a little shocked; not that she found any sacredness in the existing order of things, but the idea of complete social change was too radical. She lit another cigaret from the butt of the first and fumed a while with eyes closed, forehead bent on her knees. When she glanced up again, she said:

"I remember now, outworld man. Things I have read in books. Even a few very old ones, that Biocontrol must think were all burned long ago. Unlike most, I know how the masters first came to power. And we can't overthrow them. At least, not without dying." She stretched like a cat. "And life amuses me."

"I realize Biocontrol has the sole knowledge of how to manufacture the antitoxin," Flandry said. "But once you stood over their technicians with a gun—"

"Listen to me," said Luang. "When Unan Besar was first colonized, Biocontrol was merely one arm of the government. Troubles came that I don't quite know about: foolishness and corruption. Biocontrol was staffed by men who were very clever and . . . what word? . . . saintly? They wanted the best for this planet, so they issued a proclamation calling for a certain program of reform. The rest of the government didn't like this. But Biocontrol was standing by the great vats where the antitoxin is made. The process must be watched all the time, you understand, or it goes bad. One man, pulling the wrong switch, can ruin an entire batch. Biocontrol could not be attacked without danger of wrecking those vats. The people were afraid they would get no more medicine. They forced the government men to lift the siege of Biocontrol, and yield.

"Then Biocontrol was the whole government. They said they would not rule forever, only long enough to establish the best social order for Unan Besar. One that was carefully planned and would endure."

"I see." Flandry spoke with a coyote grin. "They were scientists, and wanted a rationalized civilization. Probably they subscribed to some version of Psychotechnocracy. It was a popular theory in those days. When will the intellectuals learn that scientific government is a contradiction in terms? Since people didn't fit into this perfect scheme—and the scheme being perfect by definition, this must be the fault of the people—Biocontrol never did find an occasion to give up its power. After a

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few generations, it evolved into an old-fashioned oligarchy. Such governments always do."

"Not quite." He wasn't sure how closely the girl had followed him. Perforce he used many Anglic words, hoping Pulaoic had cognates. But her gaze was steady on him and she spoke with almost a scholar's detachment. "Biocontrol was forever Biocontrol. I mean, they have always recruited promising boys and trained them to tend the vats. Only after a long period of service, rising from grade to grade, can a member hope to get on the governing board."

"So . . . it *is* still a rule by technicians," he said. "Odd. The scientific mentality isn't well suited to governing. I'd expect Biocontrol would hire administrators, who would eventually make all the real decisions."

"That did happen once, about two hundred years ago," she said. "But a dispute arose. The corps of hireling experts started giving orders independently. Several Biocontrol people realized that Biocontrol had become a mere figurehead. One of them, Weda Tawar—there are statues to him all over the planet—waited until his turn to go on watch. Then he threatened to destroy the vats, unless the hireling corps surrendered itself to him. His fellow conspirators had already seized the few spaceships and were prepared to blow them up. Every human on Unan Besar would have died. The hirelings capitulated.

"Since then, Biocontrol has done its own governing. And during his novitiate, every member is trained and sworn to destroy the vats—and, thus, all the people—if the power of his fellowship is threatened."

That explains the general sloppiness, Flandry thought. *There's no bureaucracy to control things like slums and crime rates. By the same token, Biocontrol itself no longer exists for any reason except to man the brewery and perpetuate its own meaningless power.*

"Do you think they actually would carry out their threat, if it came to that?" he asked.

"Many of them, at least," said Luang. "They are very harshly trained as boys." She shivered. "It's not a risk to take, outworld man."

Kemul stirred on the floor. "Enough of this buttertonguing!" he grumbled. "We've still not learned what you really came here for."

"Or why the Guards want you," said Luang.

It grew most quiet. Flandry could hear the lapping of oily water against the piles below him. He thought he could hear thunder, far out over the jungle.

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Then someone cursed down in the tavern, there was a scuffle, a joy girl screamed and a body splashed in the canal. Only a minor argument: the loser could be heard swimming away, and the music resumed.

"They want me," said Flandry, "because I can destroy them."

Kemul, who had ignored the fight under his broad bottom, half-rose. "Don't joke Kemul!" he gasped. Even Luang's cool eyes widened, and she lowered her feet to the floor.

"How would you like to be free men?" Flandry asked. His gaze returned to Luang. "And women," he added. "Obviously."

"Free of what?" snorted Kemul.

"*Most* obviously. . . . Oh. Yes. How would you like to be done with Biocontrol? To get your antitoxin free, or for a very low price that anyone can afford? It's possible, you know. You're being outrageously overcharged for the stuff, as a form of taxation which, I'm sure, has been screwed higher each decade."

"It has," said Luang. "But Biocontrol possesses the vats, and the only knowledge of their use."

"When Unan Besar was colonized," Flandry said, "this whole sector was backward and anarchic. The pioneers seem to have developed some elaborate process, probably biosynthetic, for preparing the antitoxin. A process which even in that day would have been clumsy, old-fashioned. Any decent laboratory—on Spica VI, for instance—can now duplicate any organic molecule. The apparatus is simple and foolproof, the quantity that can be manufactured is unlimited."

Luang's lips parted to show small white teeth. "You want to go there," she whispered.

"Yes. At least, that's what Brothers Bandang and Warouw are afraid I want to. Not a bad idea, either. Mitsuko Laboratories on Spica VI would pay me a handsome commission for calling as juicy a market as Unan Besar to their attention. Hm, yes-s-s," said Flandry dreamily.

Kemul shook his head till the gray hair swirled. "No! Kemul doesn't have it badly, the way things are. Not badly enough to risk the cage for helping you. Kemul says turn him in, Luang."

The girl studied Flandry for a long minute. Her face was not readable. "How would you get off this planet?" she asked.

"Details." Flandry waved a hand in an airy gesture.

"I thought so. If you don't know, how can we? Why should we hazard anything, least of all our lives?"

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"Well—" Flandry flexed his arms, trying to work out some of the tension that stiffened them and made his voice come out not quite natural. "Well, we can discuss that later."

She blew smoke. "For you," she said, "will there be a later?"

He donned the smile which had bowled over female hearts from Scotha to Antares. "If you wish it, my lady."

She shrugged. "I might. If you make it worth the risk and trouble. But Kemul already took everything you were carrying. What can you buy your next thirty days with?"

That was a good question.

VI

THE part of Swamp Town between Lotus Flower Canal, the great spice warehouse of Barati & Sons, the Canal of the Drowned Drunkard, and those miserable tenement rafts where Kompong Timur faded into unreclaimed watery wastes: was ruled by Sumu the Fat. Which is to say, every resident with a noticeable income—artisan, rentier, joy girl, bazaar keeper, freight hauler, priest, wizard, coiner, et multifarious cetera—paid regular tribute to him. It was shrewdly calculated according to ability to pay, so no one resented it dangerously. Sumu even made some return. His bully boys kept rival gangs out of the district; sometimes they caught lone-wolf robbers and made examples of them. He was an excellent fence for goods stolen from other parts of town. With his connections, he could even help a legitimate merchant make an extra profit, or find a buyer for the daughter of some impoverished man who didn't know where his next pill was coming from. In such cases, Sumu didn't charge an exhorbitant commission. He offered rough-and-ready justice to those who wanted to lay their quarrels before him. Every year at the Feast of Lanterns, he bore the whole expense of decorating the quarter and went about giving candy to small children.

In short, he was hated no more than any other overlord would have been.

Wherefore Sumu's man Pradjung, making his regular rounds to collect the tribute, was distressed to hear that a new storyteller had been operating on Indramadju Square for two whole days without so much as a by-your-leave.

Pradjung, who was of ordinary size but notoriously good with a knife, went thither. It was a clear day. The sun stood high and white in a pale sky. Sheet metal walls, canal water, even thatch and wood cast back its radiance until all things

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swam in that fierce light, wavered with heat haze but threw hard blue shadows. Far off above the roofs, Biocontrol Pagoda reared as if molten, too dazzling to look at. Sound of squalling voices and rumbling motors seemed baked out of the air; women squatted in doorways nursing their babies and gasping. As he hurried past the booths of listless potters, Pradjung heard his own sandals go *slap-slap* on planks where tar bubbled.

He crossed a suspension bridge to the hummock where Indramadju Square had been constructed, so long ago that the stone dragons on the central fountain were weathered into pug dogs. The fountain was dry, its plumbing had been stolen generations back, but fruit and vegetable vendors from the outlying paddy-farms still brought their produce here to sell. Their booths surrounded the square with thatch and tiny red flags. Because it was cooler here than many other places, and the chance of stealing an occasional *modjo* not too bad, children and idlers could always be found by the score. Which made it a good location for storytellers.

The new one sat under the basin. He had the usual fan in one hand and the usual bowl set out for contributions. But nothing else about him was normal. Pradjung must push through a crowd six deep before he could even see the man.

Then he gaped. He had never known anyone like this. The fellow was tall, reasonably young, and very well-muscled. But his skin was pale, his face long, his nose a jutting beak, his eyes deepset and of altogether wrong shape. He had hair on his upper lip, which was uncommon but not unknown; however, this mustache was brown, like the close-cropped hair peeping from beneath his turban. He spoke with a strong, unidentifiable accent, and had none of the traditional storyteller mannerisms. Yet he was outrageously at ease.

Which well he might be, for he spoke not of the Silver Bird or Polesotechnarch Van Rijn or any ancient themes known everywhere by heart. He told new stories, most of them indecent and all impudently funny. The crowd shrieked laughter.

"—Now after this long and mighty career, warring in the air for his country, Pierre the Fortunate was granted leave to come home and rest. No honor, no reward was considered too great for this prince among pilots." The storyteller glanced modestly downward. "But I am a poor man, O gentle and generous people. Weariness overwhelms me."

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Money tinkled into his bowl. After pouring it into a bulging purse, the storyteller leaned back, lit a cigaret, swigged from a wineskin, and resumed: "The home of Pierre the Fortunate was called Paris and was the richest, most beautiful of cities. There, and there alone, had men altogether mastered the arts of pleasure: not mere wallowing in quantity, but the most subtle refinements, the most elegant and delicious accompaniments. For example, the tale is told of a stranger from an uncouth land called Texas, who was visiting in Paris—"

"Hold!"

Pradjung muscled past the inner circle and confronted the newcomer. He heard a growl behind him, and touched his knife. The noise subsided to angry mutters. A few people on the fringes began to drift away, elaborately inconspicuous.

"What is your name, stranger, and where are you from?" snapped Pradjung.

The storyteller looked up. His eyes were an eerie gray color. "That's no way to begin a friendship," he reproved.

Pradjung flushed. "Do you know where you are? This is Sumu's territory, may his progeny people the universe. Who told an outland wretch like you to set up shop?"

"None told me not to."

The answer was soft enough for Pradjung to concede—after all, the storyteller was earning at a rate which promised a good rakeoff— "New arrivals of good will are never unwelcome. But my master Sumu must decide. He will surely fine you for not coming to him at once. But if you are courteous to him and—ahem!—his faithful men, I do not think he will have you beaten."

"Dear me, I hope not." The storyteller rose to his feet. "Come, then, take me to your leader."

"You could show his men the politeness they deserve, and gain friends," Pradjung said, glancing at the full purse.

"Of course." The storyteller raised his wineskin. "Your very good health, sir." He took a long drink and hung the skin on his back.

"What of our story?" cried some rustic, too indignant to remember Pradjung's knife.

"I fear I am interrupted," said the stranger.

The crowd made a sullen way. Pradjung was feeling surly enough himself, now, but held his peace. Wait till they came to Sumu.

The great man dwelt in a wooden house unpretentious on the outside, except for its dimensions and the scarfaced

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guards at every door. But the interior was so full of furniture, drapes, rugs, incense burners, caged songbirds, aquaria, and assorted crockery that you could easily get lost. The harem wing was said to possess a hundred inmates, though not always the same hundred. What most impressed a visitor was the air conditioning system, bought at fabulous expense in the palace section of town.

Sumu lolled in a silkite campaign chair, riffling through some papers with one hand and scratching his belly with the other. A pot of sweet black herb tea and a bowl of cookies stood in easy reach. Two daggermen squatted behind him, and he personally packed a gun. It was an archaic snubnosed chemical weapon throwing lead slugs, but it would kill you as dead as any blaster.

"Well?" Sumu raised his bulldog face and blinked nearsightedly.

Pradjung shoved the storyteller forward with a rough hand. "This outland *sarwin* has been narrating on Indramadju for two days, tuan. See how plump his purse has grown! But when I asked him to come pay his respects to my noblest of masters, he refused with vile oaths until I compelled him at dagger point."

Sumu peered at the stranger and inquired mildly. "What is your name, and where are you from?"

"Dominic is my name." The tall man shifted in Pradjung's grip, as if uneasy.

"A harsh sound. But I asked where you were from."

"Pegunungan Gradjugang—ouch!—It lies beyond the Tindjil Ocean."

"Ah. So." Sumu nodded wisely. One knew little about the dwellers on other continents. Their overlords sometimes come here, but only by air and only to visit the overlords of Kompong Timur. Poor folk rarely traveled far. One heard that strange ways of life had grown up under alien conditions. Doubtless generations of poor diet and insufficient sunlight had bleached this man's people. "Why did you not seek me out as soon as you arrived? Anyone could have told you where I live."

"I did not know the rule," said Dominic pettishly. "I thought I was free to earn a few honest coins."

"More than a few, I see," Sumu corrected. "And is it honest to deny me my right? Well, ignorance may pass for an excuse this time. Let us count what you have gotten thus far today. Then we can decide on a proper weekly sum for you to contribute, as well as the fine for not reporting immediately."

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Pradjung grinned and snatched after Dominic's purse. The tall man stepped back and cast it himself into Sumu's lap. "Here, tuan," he exclaimed. "Don't trust this ugly man. He has reptile eyes. Count the coins yourself. But this is not one day's take. It's two days, yes, and a good part of one night. Ask in the square. They'll tell you how long I worked."

"Will they tell how much else you have hidden about you, begetter of worms?" sneered Pradjung. "Off with your garments! A fortune could lie in that turban."

Dominic backed further. Pradjung signalled to the daggermen, who closed in on the storyteller and seized his arms. As he went to his knees, lest bones break, Pradjung kicked him in the stomach. "Strip," said Pradjung. Sumu continued sorting coins into his sarong.

Dominic groaned. There proved to be nothing in his kilt except himself, but wound into the turban was a package. Pradjung unfolded it before Sumu's eyes. An awed silence fell on the room.

The wrapping was a blouse: some fabric hitherto unheard of, colored like the palest dawn, fine enough to fold into cubic centimeters but utterly wrinkleproof. Inside the package lay a multiple-dialed watch of incredibly fine workmanship, and a wallet not made from leather or any recognized plastic. The wallet held cards and money, whose papery substance was equally strange, whose engraving was beautiful but whose legends were in a peculiar form of the alphabet and an altogether foreign language.

VII

SUMU made a sign against evil. "Nine sticks of incense to the gods at Ratu Temple!" He swung on Dominic, who had been released and knelt shuddering. "Well?"

"Tuan!" Dominic flopped on his face. "Tuan, take all my cash!" he wailed. "I am a poor man and the humblest of your slaves. Give me back those valueless trinkets bequeathed me by my poor old mother!"

"Valueless, I think *not*." Sumu mopped the sweat of excitement from his forehead. "We shall have a little truth out of you, storyteller."

"Before the Three Headed One himself, you have the truth!"

"Come, now," said Sumu in his kindliest tone. "I am not cruel. I should not like to have you questioned. Especially since I would have to entrust the questioning to Pradjung, who seems to have taken a dislike to you."

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Pradjung licked his lips. "I know these stubborn cases, mighty master," he said. "It may take me a while. But he will still be able to talk when he decides to. Come along, you!"

"Wait, wait, wait," said Sumu. "Not that quickly. Give him a few swats of the cane across his feet and see if his tongue loosens. Every man deserves a chance to be heard, Pradjung."

Dominic beat his brow against the floor. "It is a family secret, nothing but a family secret," he begged. "Your nobleness could not profit by hearing it."

"If that is so, rest assured I shall keep your secret inviolate," promised Sumu magnanimously. "Anyone here who cannot keep a secret goes straight into the canal."

Pradjung, who saw an opportunity slipping past, seized the bastinado and applied it. Dominic cried out. Sumu told Pradjung to stop, and offered Dominic wine.

Eventually the story came out.

"My brother George found the ship," Dominic said between gulps for air and gulps of drink. His hands trembled. "He was a timber cruiser, and often went far into the mountains. In one deep, misty ravine, he found a spaceship."

"A ship from the stars?" Sumu made violent signs and promised another dozen joss sticks. He had heard of the Betelgeuseans, of course, in a vague way, and even seen a few of their goods. But nonetheless he bore a childhood of myth about the Ancestors, the Stars, and the Monsters, which a sketchy education had not removed.

"Just so, tuan. I do not know if the vessel came from the Red Star, whence they say Biocontrol receives visitors on certain nights, or from some other. It might even have been from Mother Terra, for this shirt fits me. It must have crashed out of control long ago, long ago. Jungle had covered it, but could not destroy the metal. Wild animals laired within. Doubtless they had eaten the bones of the crew, but they could not open the hatches to the holds. Those were not locked, however, only dogged shut. So my brother George went down and saw wonders beyond reckoning—"

It took half an hour to elaborate on the wonders.

"Of course, he could not carry such things on his back," said Dominic. "He took only these articles, for proof, and returned home. It was his thought that he and I should raise enough money somehow for vehicles to get the cargo out. How, I knew not, for we were poor. But surely we would never tell our overlord, who would take all the treasure for himself! Long we

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discussed the matter in secret. George never told me where the ship lay." Dominic sighed. "He knew me well. I am not a resolute man. The secret was safest with him."

"Well?" Sumu dithered in his chair. "Well? What happened?"

"Ah, what happens all too often to poor folk. I was a tenant farmer of Proprietor Kepuluk. George, as I told you, was a timber cruiser for the master's lumbering operations. Because of our scheming to get money, we neglected our work. Frequently our overseers reproved us with a touch of the electrostick. But the dream we had would not let us rest in peace. George was at last dismissed. He brought his family to live with me. But my plot of ground was so small it would barely support my own wife and children. We went swiftly into debt to Proprietor Kepuluk. George had a young and beautiful wife, whom Kepuluk seized for the debt. Then George went amok and fell upon Kepuluk. It took six men to drag him away."

"So Djordju is dead?" cried an appalled Sumu.

"No. He was sentenced to enslavement. Now he toils as a field hand on one of Kepuluk's plantations. Of course, my farm was taken from me, and I must make my way as best I could. I found places for the women and children, then set out alone."

"Why?" demanded Sumu.

"What was there for me in Pegunungan Gradjugang, except a lifetime's toil for barely enough wages to buy my pills? I had always had a talent for storytelling, so I yarned my way to the ocean. There I got a scullery job on a watership bound for this continent. From Tandjung Port I came afoot to Kompong Timur. Here, I thought, I could make a living—even save a little money—and inquire with great discretion, until at last—"

"Yes? Yes? Speak up!"

Pradjung reached for the cane again, but Sumu waved him back. Dominic sighed heartbreakingly. "My tale is ended, tuan."

"But your plan! What is it?"

"Ah, the gods hate me. It seemed easy enough, once. I would find a patron, a kind man who would not begrudge me a good payment and a position in his household, in exchange for what I could tell him. He must be rich, of course. Rich enough to buy George from Kepuluk and outfit an expedition under George's guidance. Oh, my lord —" Dominic lifted streaming eyes—"do you perchance know of some wealthy man who would listen to my tale? If you could arrange it for me, I would reward you with half of what I was paid myself."

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"Be still," commanded Sumu.

He lay back in his chair, thinking furiously. In the end: "Perhaps your luck has turned, Dominic. I have some small savings of my own, and am always ready to venture what I can afford in the hope of an honest profit."

"Oh, my lord!"

"You need not kiss my feet yet. I have made no promises. But let us take our ease and share a midday meal. Afterward we can talk further."

The talk stretched on. Sumu had learned caution. But Dominic had answers for all questions; "I have had two years now, largest of masters, to think this out."

An expedition into the mountains would be costly. It should not be outfitted here in Kompong Timur. That would not only add the expense of transporting equipment across the ocean, but would attract far too much notice. (Sumu agreed. Some palace-dwelling *sarwin* like Nias Warouw would hear about it, investigate, and claim a major share of the loot.) Nor was it a good idea to use the primitive banking facilities of Unan Besar: too traceable. No, the cash itself must be smuggled out of town, across the lake and down the Ukong River to Tandjung, where Sumu's trusty men would take it across the ocean in their baggage. Once arrived in Pegunungan Gradjugang, they would pose as entrepreneurs hoping to establish a hardwood trade with the Selatan Islands, a market which the local bigwigs had neglected. They would buy a few experienced slaves as assistants, who would just happen to include Djordju. Then in secret, Djordju would guide Sumu's representatives to the ship.

The new hardwood company would buy some thousands of hectares from the immense Kepuluk holdings, and also acquire the flyers, junglecats, and similar machinery needed to exploit a forest. That would be expensive, but it couldn't be helped; any other way, Kepuluk would smell a rat. But thereafter, under cover of their logging operations, the expedition could plunder the ship at leisure. Doubtless its cargo should be sold very gradually, over a period of years, so as to avoid undue attention and to keep up the price of such exotic stuffs.

"I see." Sumu wiped curry from his chins, belched, and called for a girl to pick his teeth. "Yes. Good."

"George is a very resolute man," said Dominic. "His hope was always to lift our family out of tenantdom. He would die before telling anyone where the ship lies, unless I persuade him first." Slyly: "If Proprietor Kepuluk does not remember his

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face, I alone could identify my dear brother among all the plantation slaves."

"Yes, yes, yes," snapped Sumu. "I am a fair man. Ask anyone if I am not fair. You and Djordju shall have proper shares in the loot. Enough to go into business, under my protection. But now, about the cost—"

That night Dominic stayed in the house of Sumu. He was, in fact, a guest for several days. His chamber was pleasant, though it lacked windows, and he had enough company, for it opened directly on a barrack-room where the bachelor daggermen lived. No one got past that room without a key to the automatic lock, which Dominic didn't ask for. He messed with the daggermen, traded jokes, told them stories, and gambled. Cards on Unan Besar had changed faces, but were still essentially the same old pack of fifty-two. Dominic taught the boys a game called poker. They seized on it avidly, even though he won large amounts from them. Not that he cheated—that would have been fatal, under so many experienced eyes. He simply understood the game better. The daggermen accepted the fact, and were willing to pay for instruction. It would take many years to get back from neophytes elsewhere all that Dominic eventually won, but the Pulaoic mentality was patient, unusually so.

Sumu shared that patience. He did not rush into Dominic's project, but made inquiries. A thornfruit dealer was located who had bought occasional shipments originating on Proprietor Kepuluk's holdings in Pegunungan Gradjugang. Hm, yes, they were mountaineers and forest dwellers there mostly, weren't they? The climate made them pale-skinned, if that hadn't simply been genetic drift. Sumu had no idea what genetic drift might be: the term impressed him enough that he didn't stop to ask exactly how light a complexion was meant. He was shrewd, but no intellectual heavyweight. He was convinced.

The investment was considerable, a hundred thousand silvers to start with. Two men were needed to lift the chest holding it. Those were Pradjung and a butcher boy named Mandau, both tough and strong and utterly reliable—especially since Pradjung still spat at Dominic's name. They would accompany the chest and the storyteller to Tandjung, where several others traveling by more open routes would meet them on the ship *Sekaju*.

About this time, when Dominic was again interviewed, he voiced a mild complaint at his detention and said he was due for his pill. Also, was it fitting

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that a loyal (however humble) servant of the famous Sumu went about in these dirty old clothes? Sumu shrugged and allowed Dominic to go, accompanied by a daggerman just in case. Dominic was in a happy mood. He spent a long time shopping for garments, while the daggerman yawned and sweated. Dominic made up for it by buying them both large quantities of wine. Afterward the luckless daggerman admitted he'd been too tired and drunk when Dominic went off to get his pill. He stayed in the tavern and never actually saw the storyteller go to the district dispensary. But Dominic soon came back to him and the fun resumed.

The next night had been set for departure. Dominic whiled the hours away with a new game. As the bravos came into the bunkroom for their naps, one by one during the course of the day, Dominic bet them he could make five pat five-card poker hands out of any twenty-five cards. He let his incredulous friends provide the pack, shuffle, and deal. Once or twice he lost, but the net sum he tucked away in several already fat purses was rather fantastic. Next day a bully who had once studied some arithmetic figured out that the odds in Dominic's favor had been about fifty to one. By then Dominic was gone.

He left the house after sunset. Rain sluiced from a hidden sky, roaring on the canal surface and drowning distant lamps. A speedboat waited with Pradjung, Mandau, and the chest of silvers. Dominic kissed Sumu's unclipped toenails and embarked. The boat slipped into darkness.

Several days previously, Dominic had proposed a route of his own as the least dangerous way out of town. Sumu had grinned and told him to stick to his storytelling. Dominic became so insistent that Sumu was forced to explain in detail precisely why a route down Burning Torch Canal and so out into the lake would attract less notice.

Now, when the boat planed close to the Bridge Where Amahai Wept, Dominic said a polite, "Excuse me." He reached across the cockpit and switched off motor and headlights.

"What in all hells—!" Pradjung leaped to his feet. Dominic slid back the canopy. Rain cataracted hot and heavy upon them. The boat slid toward a halt.

Pradjung snatched for the revolver Sumu had lent him. Dominic, timid spinner of yarns, failed to cower as expected. The chopping motion of his hand was instantaneous. A hard edge smacked on Pradjung's wrist. The gun clattered free.

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The boat went slowly under the Bridge Where Amahai Wept. Someone leaped from the span. The deck thundered beneath that gorilla impact. Mandau snarled and tried to grapple. Kemul the mugger brushed his arms aside, put Mandau across one knee, broke his back, and threw him overboard.

Pradjung had drawn a knife. He stabbed underhanded at Dominic's belly. But Dominic wasn't there any more. He was a few centimeters to one side. His left wrist struck out, deflecting the blade. His right hand took Pradjung's free arm and spun the daggerman around. They fell together, but Dominic had the choking hold. After a few seconds, Pradjung turned blue and lay quietly.

Dominic got off. Kemul picked up the bravo. "No, wait," protested Dominic, "he's still alive —" Kemul threw Pradjung into the canal. "Oh, well," said Dominic and gunned the engine.

Headlights strengthened from behind, through the rain. "Kemul thinks Sumu had you followed," said the mugger. "It would make sense. Now they want to catch up with us and find why your lights went out. Shall we fight?"

"Can you lift a chest with a hundred thousand silvers?" asked Captain Sir Dominic Flandry.

Kemul whistled. Then: "Yes, Kemul can carry it a ways."

"Good. We needn't fight."

Flandry steered close to the left pier. As they went by a ladder, Kemul stepped off with the chest under one arm. Flandry revved the motor and went over the side. Treading water in the dark, he watched the second boat pursue his own out of sight.

Half an hour later, he stood in Luang's quarters above the Tavern Called Swampman's Ease and gestured at the open chest. "A hundred thousand," he said grandly. "Plus a good bit extra I made gambling. And a firearm, which I understand is hard for commoners to come by." It was thrust firmly into his own belt.

The girl lit a cigaret. "Well," she said, "the usual black market price for a pill is two thousand." She put a vial on the table. "Here are ten capsules. You have credit with me for forty more."

The lamp in the hooded god's hands threw soft coppery light across her. She wore a little paint on the amber skin, which was not her custom: luminous blue outlining eyes and breasts. There was a red blossom in her hair. For all its coolness, he thought her voice was not entirely firm.

"When the boy brought us

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your note," said Kemul, "it seemed foolishness to wait in ambush where you desired. Even though we were surprised to hear from you at all. When you first left us to win your fortune, Kemul thought you a dead man already."

"You have more than common luck, I think." Luang frowned at her cigaret, avoiding Flandry's look. "In the past two or three days, there have been public announcements in the name of Nias Warouw. A reward is offered for you dead and a bigger one for you alive. The loudspeaker boats have not yet gotten as far as Sumu's district. It's plain to see, nobody who heard the criers had chanced to spy you, or knew you were with him. But he must soon have realized."

"I made the swindle move as fast as possible," Flandry said. The air was so hot and damp that he hoped they wouldn't notice the sweat on him was suddenly rather cold. "I'm an experienced con man. It's half my profession, one way or another. To be sure, I was a bit nervous about pulling a Spanish Prisoner here. You must have some home-grown version. But with refinements—" He broke off. They didn't follow his words, full of Anglic phrases as was necessary. "What do I owe you for my shirt and watch and wallet? It was good of you to give them back to me for a stake."

"Nothing," said Kemul. "They were useless to us, as Luang explained."

The girl bit her lip. "I hated for you to go out like that—all alone—" She put the cigaret to her mouth and inhaled so hard that her cheeks filled with shadow. Abruptly and roughly: "You are very clever, Terra man. I never had allies, except Kemul. They always betray you. But I think you could be a profitable associate."

"Thanks," said Flandry.

"One question yet. I forgot to ask you before. You knew Biocontrol makes all the antitoxin. What gave you the idea you could get any from us?"

Flandry yawned. He felt tired after all the strain and watchfulness. It was good to lounge back on the bed and look up at Luang, where she paced back and forth. "I felt confident *someone* would have some extras for sale," he answered. "Human cussedness is bound to find ways, when anything as valuable as this drug is to be had. For instance, armed raids on dispensaries, by masked men. Or the hijacking of shipments. Not often, I suppose, but it must happen occasionally. Or . . . well, there must be hunters, sailors, prospectors, and so on . . . men who have legitimate reasons for

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not coming near a dispensary every thirty days, and are allowed an advance supply of antitoxin. Once in a while they will be murdered, or robbed, or will die naturally and be stripped. Or simple corruption: a local dispenser juggles his records and peddles a few extra pills. Or he is bribed or blackmailed into doing it."

Luang nodded. "Yes," she said, "you are wise in such matters." With a sudden, odd defiance: "I get some capsules myself, now and then, from a certain dispenser. He is a young man."

Flandry chuckled. "I'm sure he gets more than value in return."

She stubbed out her cigaret with a savage gesture. Kemul rose, stretching. "Time for Kemul's nap," he said. "Around sunrise we can talk of what's to be done. The Captain is wily, Luang, but Kemul thinks best he be gotten out of Kompong Timur and used elsewhere for a time. Till Warouw and Sumu forget him."

Her nod was curt. "Yes. We will talk about it tomorrow."

"Good rest, Luang," said Kemul. "Are you coming, Captain? Kemul has an extra bed."

"Good rest, Kemul," said Luang.

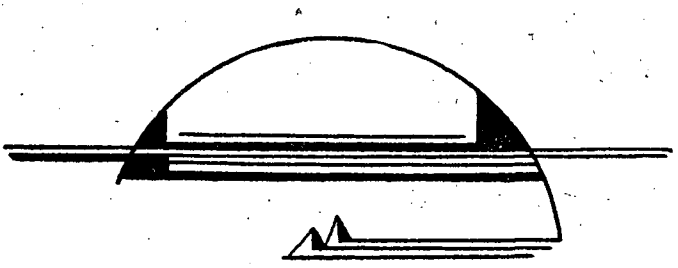
The giant stared at her.

"Good rest," she repeated.

Kemul turned to the door. Flandry couldn't see his face; not that Flandry particularly cared to, just then. "Good rest," said Kemul, barely audible, and went out.

Someone laughed like a raucous bird, down in the joyhouse. But the rain was louder, filling all the night with a dark rushing. Luang did not smile at Flandry. Her mouth held a bitterness he did not quite understand, and she switched off the light as if it were an enemy.

Concluded next month



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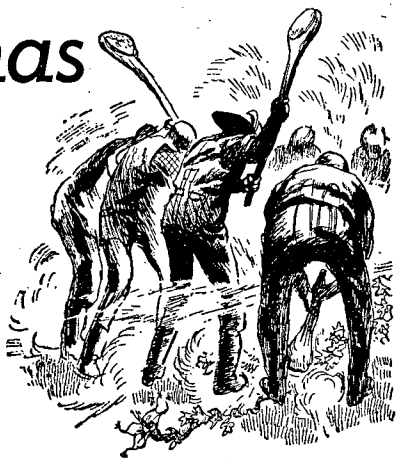
The Melanas

By ARTHUR PORGES

Illustrator SUMMERS



When man pursues happiness to its ultimate perfection, does he not run the risk of losing the imperfect happiness he already has?

I REJECT the whole idea. You'll never convince me this is right." Caslor's dark eyes were brooding; his taught, eager face unusually grim. There's no real necessity for mass destruction, or indeed for any killing."

"So you've said—and have been repeating for weeks now," Partol replied, wearily good-humored. "But you don't really offer any evidence to support the 'anti's' "

Caslor frowned, leaning forward, his slight body tense. "I haven't any. Not that practical people would accept. Call it intuition, a hunch, if you like, but I urge, I beg—do not begin such a bloody campaign against these harmless animals."

"You don't understand the problem." Partol's smile was indulgent. "You're neither a scientist nor a farmer—only a poet. No, don't take offense," he added

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quickly, as Caslor flushed in resentment. "I retract the 'only.' Nobody appreciates your art more than I, believe me. But we're dealing with a practical question, a nasty, unpoetic one, that must be faced in a realistic way. Think of it like this. Here we are, living on the most beautiful planet that ever circled a star. Just look." He gestured towards the open window. From their sunny perch in the topmost chamber of a sky-flung crystal-wood tower, they could see mile after mile of lush, green meadows, varied with stands of mighty trees, and wearing great concourses of glowing flowers proudly, like medals on the breast of a reclining hero.

A group of children, shrieking joyously, raced over the springy turf; and a flock of scarlet birds rose before them like living fireworks. Their melodic chirping, like distant bells, made fairy music. A fragrant breeze stirred the room's gay tapestries; it held the scent of spring in its cool threads. Caslor's melancholy eyes brightened momentarily. He had seen thirty springs, each more nearly perfect than the last. Partol was right; their world was incomparable.

"On this whole planet," Partol resumed, "there is not a single dangerous animal—nothing that bites, or claws, or stings. No carnivores at all. And only one living thing that can be called obnoxious."

"But it's not," Caslor protested. "People are blind, convinced of something utterly false. There is a strange restlessness tormenting them."

"True," Partol admitted thoughtfully. "There has been some recognition of that fact. Farmers have grumbled about melanas for centuries, yet only now does any action seem really imminent. I have never seen people so stirred up. Still, why fight the torrent? What do these animals matter, after all? They might not be objectionable in any less perfect environment; I concede that. And they're probably pretty little brutes, physically, judging, of course, from the scantiest evidence. But they're nuisances all the same. There's not a valley that isn't over-run with them, and they destroy a large percentage of our crops. That's their main sin. In addition—and this bothers me more, since I'm not a farmer—they call constantly in those nerve-wracking squeaks. Did you ever notice, incidentally, that the more beautiful the surroundings, the more of these wretched beasts congregate there, spoiling the perfection with their unholy racket? They remind me of a false note in a great symphony—or a wrong

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word in a fine poem. If you found such a word in your sonnet, wouldn't you remove it?"

"If I did, it would be to put a better one in its place. Would a blank be any better? Besides, there is an old theory—a superstition, I admit—that the Gods resent perfection. Do not take folklore, old racial tabus, too lightly; historians have learned that."

"You are eloquent today," Partol said, giving him a wondering glance.

"Words are my profession," was the bitter reply. "That is why the men of action have swept me aside in this controversy. Not that action has been our forte in the past. We are a strangely introspective people, and have fathered many queer doctrines. Have you ever considered our peculiar penchant for fantasy—or hallucination, if you prefer? It pervades all our literature and painting."

Partol nodded. "It is quite true that we are basically a sensitive, gentle race, simple in our tastes and habits. We are satisfied with our crops and plain houses, having no advanced technology, nor feeling the need of one. But a civilization cannot remain static indefinitely, even in a perfect environment. It must advance or retreat; and many of us now feel it is time to expand—to realize fully our potentialities. At least, that is one reason given by those who most strongly urge this—this extermination."

"Fulfilment by pointless slaughter?"

Partol shrugged. "Their first step, strange though it might seem to you, is the extirpation of these melanas. If nothing else, this campaign should prove a yardstick of our abilities. To wipe out such elusive, alert animals will be a first class intelligence test. And it will teach us the power of concerted action, of unity of purpose. There is too much individualism among us for real progress. This will toughen our fibre as a race. Or so the argument goes," he added, as if a little unsure of his own reasoning.

"How will you manage it," Caslor asked, his voice cold. "We've had no weapons for years—no traps, no poisons. There are no records of such horrors after the First People, thousands of years ago."

"The Council meets today, remember. Why not sit in and hear for yourself. Darkon surely will have a solution. His committee has been at work for weeks."

"I'll be there. Maybe one more appeal will stop this senseless project. Has anybody ever found a dead melana?" he queried with apparent irrelevance.

"I don't know. What difference does that make?" Partol replied,

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puzzled. "You're always talking in riddles." His tone was mildly reproving, but his hand was on Caslor's shoulder as they walked out.

The Council meeting was the most remarkable within the memory of the oldest members. Ordinarily the uncomplicated lives of the people were reflected in the casual, direct decisions of their representatives. Occasionally agricultural land was released to the flaming wildflowers that sprang up so quickly, housing new melana colonies almost as fast. A few seasons of flowering, and the soil acquired new fertility for food plants. More rarely a community farm asked for and received permission to expand. Once in decades a controversy between two of the sleepy, isolated towns was resolved without unseemly squabbling by calm elders of the Council.

But today the air crackled with emotional static. It may have been only that the prospect of planet-wide action, something wholly new and exciting, was before them; or that somehow a radical, stimulating ideaology had taken hold of a gentle people whose normal instincts would have rejected it with abhorrence. Even the most stolid felt uneasy, and squirmed in their seats.

"Last time we met," the President reminded them gravely, "it was the Council's decision to exterminate the melanas if possible. This step was not taken lightly; all of us detest killing, and we have never before in our history found it necessary.

"Evidence against this expedient was presented by Caslor, as well as others, and was respectfully heard. But our verdict was given and recorded. Today, therefore, we are ready for proposals about implementing that decision." He concluded with the traditional formula: "Who will speak?"

"I will speak." Caslor stood defiantly erect.

"Speak, Caslor," the President said courteously.

"I beg the Council to reverse this decision. Such a request is, I know, unprecedented, but so is the order itself. Why are the melanas being destroyed? Think of the flimsy reasons—pretexts, really—and draw back for shame. Because they nibble a little of our crops! Do our children starve? Does any ever go hungry in all the world?

"Because they squeak! What you hold to be so discordant is only strange, different, wonderful. I have listened to melanas since I was a child, and now I will tell you a great truth lately come to me. The melana sings! Yes, sings in a glorious, complex, 36-note scale. Listen with the

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heart; delight will follow. My friends, hear me. There is much that is odd and mysterious about these phantom animals. Their hymn to the rising sun may prove to be one of the most precious heritages of our ancient race. They have lived here unmolested longer than we; our oldest records mention them. Who knows what delicate balance of nature may be upset by our heedless meddling? Why is it that every great artist has been abnormally sensitive to these creatures?

"I repeat: do not exterminate the melanas!" He sat down, his face stony.

"I will speak!" A blocky, ruddy, little man was on his feet.

"Speak, Forban," said the President.

"Caslor refers lightly to crop damage. Farmers are not so casual. One-tenth is the toll taken. One-tenth, think of it! Surely we would pay even that, and gladly, were there any proper return. We have no wish to kill wantonly. But what good is a melana to anybody? Alive or dead, he is never seen, except by the keenest eyes, and then only as a vague, furtive form gliding among the flowers. If he has beauty, who enjoys it? The faltur birds and the golden delmines we can see, and love. Nobody would harm them. The melana's weird cries annoy us; they are not musical, like the silidor. Caslor says they sing, but who else in all the world has ears for such melody?

"Yes, and further, it is well-known that he who lingers too long near a colony suffers terrible headaches, faulty vision, and strange delusions, even to the point of madness. It is quite possible that they poison the air in some way. Many of the farmers fear them, and cannot work well when they are about. Consider this too, as against Caslor: why is it that the loveliest flower-vales always have the most of these pestilential beasts?

"I say to you: there is no room on our planet for the melana!"

"And I warn you—all of you," Caslor cried in exasperation. "You know nothing of killing. I have never slain, but I can see through other eyes than those of experience. Killing is a madness, and he who kills will never be quite sane again. The death of an individual may at times be beautiful, but not slaughter!"

"Might not crops be protected by fences?" Partol suggested diffidently to Forban.

"That was tried," he retorted. "A hundred or more years ago. The melanas always get through. Not even metal keeps them out, and there is not enough of it for such use, anyhow. Over, under, or around, they reach our crops."

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"I must remind the Council," the President said mildly, "that our decision is taken. We can consider methods only. Who will speak?"

"I will speak." Darkon, the tall, cool biologist arose, turning his back to Caslor. "My committee has studied the melana. There is much of interest, yet facts are scarce. Little is known of their structure. Dead melanas are never found. But this is not so strange as some think. We have not killed any, and those dying of natural causes—if indeed they ever die—are doubtless carried off by their companions. We need not fear upsetting the balance of nature, regardless of Caslor. Nothing feeds on the melana; they eat only our crops. It follows that to remove them affects only one phase of our ecology. Without melanas, no other organism will perish, since none depends on them. And our crops will increase by a tenth. It is as simple as that.

"From ancient records we have garnered a few impressionistic sketches. It appears that our ancestors, incredibly patient and sharp-eyed, saw melanas quite often. They tended to regard it as sacred. From the most scanty evidence, therefore, we may be certain only that the beast is small, of fragile structure, very quick-moving, and extremely wary.

"Now, as to the method of destruction, one fact is the key. Melanas always gather in the flower-valleys by day. There is no record of this peculiar behavior pattern ever varying. At night, of course, as farmers know all too well, the melanas leave these valleys to nibble crops; but they never fail to return to their own colonies by sunrise.

"A number of possible weapons were suggested by Committee Members, mostly based on those of the First People. But we must remember our unfamiliarity with such devices. There would be great danger of killing or maiming each other, especially at close quarters. Therefore, we recommend a more primitive, but safer method.

"Let a thousand men, preferably those skilled in the game of Slakmak, which, as you all know, employs a club-like implement against a small ovoid, be chosen for this task. Each morning a flower-vale will be surrounded by a circle of armed, active men. They will close in, permitting no melanas to get by, even should any try to leave their valley, something highly unlikely. In this manner, all the animals can be clubbed to death with Slakmat bats, and none missed. Since the bat is well padded, there is little danger of our being injured."

A faint murmur of disapproval

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rippled through the Council, and the President said distastefully: "Is there no less brutal way?"

Darkon shrugged. "I can think of none. Weapons are too dangerous in unpractised hands; and we know nothing of melana physiology even if we cared to prepare poison. Besides, such poison might kill other, useful animals. The bats are familiar toys to thousands."

"How long will it take?"

"Perhaps six months. With ten thousand men, we could finish very quickly, but use of so many might disrupt our economy. We cannot fail to destroy them all, since they are instinctively barred, it would seem, from leaving their colonies by day. If they scattered to the cultivated areas, the problem would be much more difficult."

The President sighed. After a moment he said reluctantly: "Let us vote on Darkon's proposal."

One by one a majority of the elders nodded their consent. Outside, a crowd of farmers roared approval as word of the decision reached them. Caslor sneered whitely at their cheering.

"You needn't participate," Partol consoled him. "Even if by some ill chance you are chosen, you can get excused."

A wry smile twisted Caslor's lips. "Certainly I would refuse to kill. But I must be there at the last. There is a riddle to be read, and if I can find the solution in time . . . I pray that I can. Yet I feel a terrible dread. There is something all wrong, Partol; I can sense it hovering about like a fog of evil and stupidity. The Council should have resisted this transient mood of our people; in time it would pass away. Now it may be too late to save us from —from what?"

Partol eyed him glumly. "At least, your hands will be clean, whatever happens."

"You are wrong; all of us share this collective guilt." In silence they left the Council Chamber.

Five months had passed, and they stood with their fellows before a valley carpeted with fiery blooms. A thin line of scarlet flowers made a bloody flash down the center of a wide, yellow patch.

"The very last colony," Partol said. "A month ahead of schedule." He glanced compassionately at Caslor's thin, ravaged face. "I assure you, I'm sorry I was picked. Of course, it was Darkon's spite—an attempt to hurt you. But had I realized the messiness of clubbing these little creatures, I would have paid the heavy fine instead. No wonder there were never any bodies found; a dead melana evaporates —what is the technical word?— sublimes, that's it. Like a puff of

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perfume. It is so much better than cremation.

"The most horrible aspect of the whole thing—and you predicted it—is the way this slaughter has corrupted the people. Their faces are frightening. Well, here we go; the ring is forming. I shall never enjoy a Slakmak game again, I fear. What's the matter?"

"Does your head ache at these killings?" Caslor asked haltingly.

Partol grimaced. "Yes," he admitted. "I hesitated to mention it. I abhor superstition. But all the farmers in our group discuss it freely. Double vision, too, at times. Perhaps, as they said, the vapors of the dead melanas are poisonous. Or maybe just the power of suggestion. You must admit that your other fears were baseless; there has been no catastrophe, after all."

"You will never be sane again," Caslor said in a low voice. "You have killed wantonly. That is one catastrophe. And yet the riddle—"

"Don't worry about me," Partol answered grimly. "But you—why do you torture yourself watching?"

"I hoped to find a clue in time." After a pause, he added in a plaintive, childlike voice: "Partol, does it seem to you as if the grass and flowers danced oddly just then?"

"Too busy to notice," the other grunted, as he moved with the closing circle of clubbers. "Heat waves, probably. How they squeak! My head is splitting."

"It's a dirge. Why does the landscape out there look so drab. Wasn't a cluster of trees standing on the hill a moment ago? Those few melanas in the center must be the last in the world. Can't they be spared? Those bloody clubs . . . I—" He broke off, his face grey and flaccid. "Partol, Partol—the riddle! I've solved it! Stop them—they must stop!"

He thrust through the tightening ring. Many men were standing aside, leaning wearily on blood-stained clubs. Before them tiny, battered bodies, golden and furry, were subliming into puffs of perfumed, faintly colored gasses. Even the fluids on the bats vanished quickly.

But a small group of men still moved in relentlessly on the vibrating grass blades that marked a last pocket of melanas. For a few seconds the frenzied poet made progress, but now he plunged in vain against the inner ring, shouting, pleading, his face wet with perspiration. Glazed eyes, mechanically flailing arms, features of cold metal—these men were beyond reach of his revelation. A thick hand hurled him back, a vicious blow that flung his gaunt body to one knee. He knelt there, weeping angry tears.

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A single wailing cry rang thinly, futilely over the valley, which was dislimning like a dream. As it died out, there vanished also, one by one, like candle flames in a chill wind, the last green fields, the last towering trees, the last glowing flowers. Caslor stared about, dazed and terrified; for out to the misty horizon there remained but the world's naked core: raw rock, seamed and ugly, a lump of slag fit only for the ashheap of the universe.

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH

No, that young lady you see below and to the left is not the result of a holiday season hangover.

She is an old friend of cover artist **Burt Schomburg,** who occasionally gets her to pose for a cover—such as this one on the January issue of FANTASTIC. The cover story, *Dreaming Eyes* is by **Miriam Allen DeFord.**

A powerful novelet will be featured in the January FANTASTIC. *The Reality Paradox,* by **Daniel Galouye,** is a strange but compelling story of a man's search for a way out of the maze of alternate realities in which we all live—and dream.

Finally, there will be the second and concluding instalment of Poul Anderson's novel, *A Plague of Masters.*

Be sure to reserve your copy of the January Fantastic. It will appear on your newsstand—with a new and striking logotype—on December 20.

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From the shoreless sea of nothingness around him, he struggled to understand the . . .

SUMMONS OF THE VOID

By DANIEL F. GALOUYE

Illustrator DOUGLAS

ITS IRIDESCENT SHAFTS radiating in all directions, the light blazed against an infinity of blackness. It was at the same time both blinding and almost imperceptibly dim.

And the sound that filled the void, along with the soft yet harsh rays, was a deafening symphony commingled with all the dissonant noises ever made. Still, he heard it as but an embarrassed whisper lost in the cavernous silence of a great cathedral.

The musiclike sound and the restless light came from everywhere. Yet they came from nowhere.

Alone, he faced the unnatural, endless night that, with all its terrifying implications, challenged his sanctuary of illumination. Abject fear forced him closer to the light and, like a moth fatally hugging the flame, he drew courage from the warmth of its rays.

Hugo Vanderloff, bowed under the weight of humility, stood before the broad, glass-surfaced desk. Dejection was manifest in the slope of his bony shoulders, the downcast gaze of his eyes, the characteristic unkemptness of his thinly scattered, gray hair.

"I wouldn't be imposing on the university, Dr. Whitmore," he pleaded. "I could scrape together whatever I need."

"I'm sorry, Hugo," President Whitmore said distantly, "but

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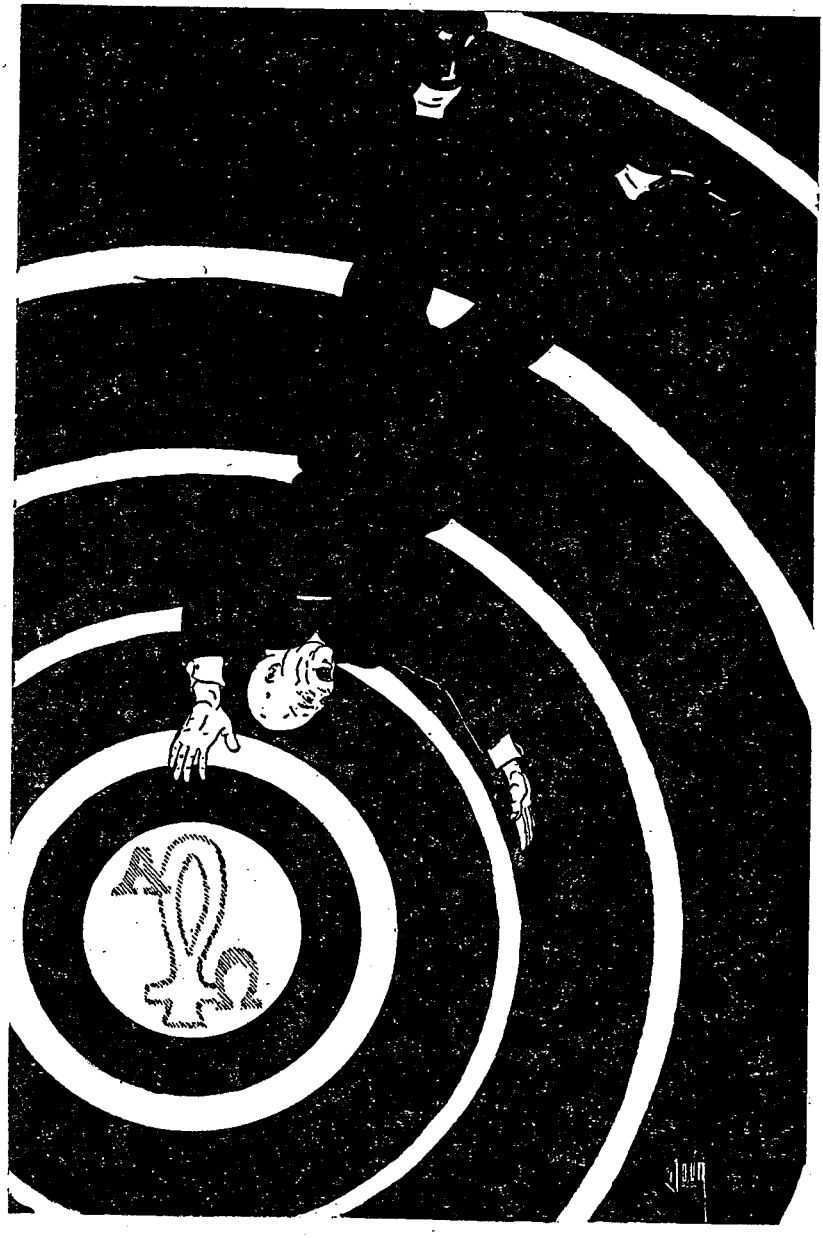

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it's been years since we've received any grants for even *legitimate* research."

Whitmore, tall and severe, seemed emphatically young—particularly in the other's presence. Young and smugly self-sufficient.

"But it's not a matter of financing an ambitious project!" Vanderloff leaned forward, his gnarled fingers splayed upon the desk. "I could improvise *all* the apparatus."

Pivoting around impatiently in his swivel chair, Whitmore stared out the window, opposing fingertips raised steeplelike before his face. "Dr. Vanderloff, you are ignoring the dignity of this institution, even your own personal dignity. You are director of our physics department—not our *paraphysical* or *metapsychological* department."

"But sensory perception is *basic!* All physical effects exist only in being perceived!"

The president laughed brassily. "I never figured you for a Berkeleianist, Hugo."

"I'm not," Vanderloff snapped. "I intended to make the point that research in perception is the privilege of *any* scientist."

The other leaned back grinning superciliously. "And you'd like me to authorize a project so you can amuse yourself in a little game of, ah—clairvoyant perception." Whitmore's voice dipped to give disdainful emphasis to the last two words.

Vanderloff closed his eyes and began forbearingly, "I'm convinced there must be means beyond the senses of reaching the isolated island of the individual mind. Present research fails to consider that supernormal perception might be achieved artificially."

Whitmore swiveled toward the window again and clasped his hands behind his head.

"Perhaps some form of modified light or sound might stimulate extrasensory perception," the physicist went on hopefully. "After all, sight and hearing are merely two resultants of the same physical process—vibratory propagation. Somewhere along the sonic-electromagnetic spectrum there may be a wavelength or a combination of frequencies that can be received directly by the mind."

Whitmore cleared his throat finally. "And you want to build an apparatus that will emanate on many different frequencies and see whether you can't intercept those emanations physically, so to speak?"

Vanderloff nodded eagerly.

"The answer," said the other with an ostentatious display of self-restraint, "is no."

Despite his utter disappointment, Vanderloff paused outside the president's office and won-

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dered how violently Whitmore would have reacted had he known the *true* objective of the proposed research.

Clinging to the poignant recollection, he savored his respite from the abysmal infinity of blackness. For a brief moment he had been swept up almost bodily into the former reality of the incident and had forgotten his frantic dependency on the light-sound for security against the awful, interminable night.

But the edge of the boundless void closed in upon him again and he embraced the soft, iridescent rays even more desperately.

This, then, must be the experiment. He must have successfully invaded the paraphysical research field. He must, even at this moment, be proving that at least one frequency of sound or electromagnetic oscillation or some chance combination of both could be received directly by the intellect.

But why was he so hopelessly lost in the experience? Why was there this sense of utter physical detachment, of timelessness? It was as though he were trapped in the extrasensory light-sound emanations.

And what was it that so urgently required him to leave the sanctuary of the light and music and venture into the terrifying, silent darkness? What must he search for out there?

He nagged his memory for additional details of the ephemeral past. But it was as though his entire personal history consisted of the one incident wherein he had made, and was refused, an humble request for research privileges.

The soft yet harsh light was fluctuating now—wavering and steadying, strengthening and diminishing. And the somber music had become erratic, as though someone were violently twisting the volume control of an amplifying circuit. Both the rays and the sound almost faded completely several times, leaving him horrified before the sudden onrush of timeless night.

Abruptly, he wondered whether the fluctuations might be some sort of signal. Then, quite suddenly, he was certain they were. He wouldn't have provided a supersensory highway into the mind without having incorporated a means of communication along that road.

Then he tensed, ignoring even his anxiety over the signaling light-sound. For another fragment of past experience was unfolding . . .

"You're going to go ahead with it anyway?"

Without replying, Vanderloff stared thoughtfully at the in-

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structor, almost envying him his youth and vitality.

"Yes, John," he answered finally. "I'm afraid I am. This will probably be my last chance to use the equipment. Whitmore's going to retire me in another year. I'm sure of it."

John Barnett wedged a cigarette between his lips and let it hang there unlighted. "What sort of equipment do you need?"

"This room, chiefly." Slowly, the physicist glanced around the large basement compartment. "Used to be a reactor here at one time, so it's well shielded. It'll block off any emanations that might get loose and give us away."

Barnett plucked the cigarette from his lips and frowned. "But the shielding—won't it defeat the purpose of the experiment?"

"Not at all." Vanderloff smiled indulgently. "If any of the radiation or sound has a psychic component, that part of the waves will manage to get through to anyone intent upon receiving it, regardless of the amount of *physical* shielding that's in the way."

"Oh," said the other concessively. Then he strode around the empty room, running his fingers over the dull, metal walls. "What else do you need?"

"A whole range of generators, transmitters, light producing devices. I want to cover as much of the electromagnetic spectrum as I can—beginning with visible light, ultraviolet, infrared. We'll also get into various X-ray frequencies and some of the harder radiations. Then we'll go in the other direction along the band—heat waves, short and long radio waves and possibly some of the untested frequencies."

"All this stuff will be going on at one time?"

"Not necessarily. But we'll keep as much of it in operation as we can without drawing excessive power. We'll work the units in combinations. And we'll be dabbling in the sound spectrum at the same time, hitting as many wavelengths as possible, from extreme supersonic on down into the bottom frequencies."

The younger man looked around and laughed. "It's going to be a madhouse in here."

"Not too much. There'll be a semblance of order. I'm going to use the same sonic impulses to modulate the electromagnetic radiations. Whatever equipment is in use at any one time will be in harmonious phase."

Barnett ground his cigarette out under his heel. "When do we start?"

"You mean you'll help?" Vanderloff asked, surprised.

"Try and stop me."

"You could get in trouble. With me, it doesn't matter. I'll be

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out of here one way or another within the next year."

"Knowing Whitmore, I'd say getting booted from these hallowed halls could be a blessing."

Vanderloff offered a faint, tired smile of appreciation. "I've been putting aside the equipment for years. All we have to do is assemble it."

"What sort of system do we follow?"

"You stay here and twist dials, shift frequencies, vary combinations of generators and transmitters. To begin with, my post will be in the faculty dormitory. I'll try to determine, by concentration, whether the equipment is on or off. That agreeable to you?"

"You've got yourself a deal, provided we trade posts occasionally."

The physicist nodded acquiescently, wondering when he should let the other in on the *real* purpose behind the experiments.

But what *was* the real purpose and why couldn't he remember it?

He dismissed the recalled incident, only to become appallingly aware once again of the imponderable stretch of psychic infinity all around him. He recoiled from the vast blackness and sought out the musical light.

But he was no longer on the edge of infinity. He was well within it and a terrible fear clutched at him while he searched frantically for the iridescent light and listened intently for the soft-harsh sound.

A great swell of relief swept over him as he relocated the almost infinitesimal glow—how far in the distance there was no way of telling—and heard the faint strain of melody. With a desperate speed, he returned to his only sanctuary in the limitless void.

And once more he took refuge in the past, summoning again the basement compartment scene.

How vivid was the remembered action! Without the distraction of his normal senses, without awareness of his own body processes and of the subtle background of kinesthetic sensation, his memory of the incident was startlingly real. And reviewing the event was almost like a process of recreation.

This time, as he watched himself and the young instructor leave the room, his attention was attracted by a curler of smoke that drifted up from the floor. It came from the cigarette which he thought Barnett had ground out under his heel. A draft from the ventilator fanned the spark and it drew fuel from the oil stain in which it lay.

Confused by the deceptive il-

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lusion of reality, he worried that should the stain and a nearby puddle of oil ignite, attention might be drawn to the almost forgotten compartment and the university might decide to put it to use. Then there would be no chance to carry out his planned research.

He willed the spark extinguished and it immediately died out, sending up a final wisp of smoke.

But, he wondered puzzledly, how could he reach into his memory of a scene and alter its former reality? Then he realized it must have merely been a delusion. Probably the glowing cigarette had actually been crushed out successfully when it was first thrown away and he was only now imagining it had continued to burn.

"Dr. Vanderloff!"

From the immensity of the void, his own name boomed at him with the force of a million voices. And he cringed from the awful impact of the overwhelming sound.

"Dr. Vanderloff! Answer!"

It was the voice of the light crying out arrogantly against the boundless psychic sea of blackness. It was a recurrent, whispered theme of the music—a blend of sound and illumination that spelled out his name again and again.

The light flickered frenziedly and the melody erratically swelled and faded, surging proudly in volume and plunging humbly back down to an almost whispered pianissimo. And the darkness pulsated in a counter-rhythm, lunging inward upon the light only to retreat again like a sea falling away from the beach.

But, of course—it *was* a signal!

He remembered now. It had been Barnett's idea. He had suggested how communication might be carried on without disrupting the amplitude of the paraphysical frequencies. By simply turning a master switch on and off, by flicking it like a telegraphic key, the strength of the emanation could be made to vary in a Morse code effect.

And it was this flashing of light, together with the swelling and diminishing intensity of the melody, that formed his name against the infinite nothingness which surrounded him.

"Dr. Vanderloff! Are you there? What's it like, Hugo?"

There was a desperate anxiety to the signals and he knew he had to answer.

But how? Had they arranged a means of accomplishing that too? If so, why couldn't he remember what he must do to complete the bridge of communication?

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Once again (as he had done hundreds of times in the past, he realized now) he sat in the dark silence of his study, his head bowed and eyes closed, his hands resting limp on his desk.

But the pencil had remained untouched and the pad had lain there gathering dust while week after week had passed without the necessity of jotting down a single notation.

He tried to lock all other considerations out of his mind, but his thoughts kept returning impatiently to the basement room —to the young instructor who was feeding the modulating sound waves of the symphony into bias circuits of the transmitting units.

Forcibly, he restricted his conscious to an almost senseless blankness and concentrated intently on the psychical direction and distance of the basement room.

He sat there motionless for perhaps an hour.

Then, as though someone had suddenly thrown open a special window to his mind, he winced before a blazing iridescent light that flared up to dispel the sightless darkness of his concentration.

There was no mistaking the effect. It was not a false sensation of vision caused by chance stimulation of an optic nerve. Nor was it a trick of his imagination. This was it. This was metaphysical perception!

Driven by a sense of urgency, he snapped on the desk light, glanced at his watch and jotted down the time on his pad. Then he reached excitedly for the telephone.

"We've got it, John!" he blurted a minute later. "What was the setup at (he looked back at the pad) ten-eighteen and twenty-two seconds?"

"Are you sure?" Barnett demanded eagerly. "Did you really see something?"

"I saw it, all right. There was no mistaking psychic reception. Do you have a record of the setup on paper, John?"

"Of course. And the apparatus is still sending. We've got a basic sound frequency of a little over fifty-six thousand cycles modulating two other pieces of equipment: the long-wave transmitter putting out at a wavelength of between ninety-six and ninety-seven thousand meters, and the Crookes tube generating X-rays of three and twenty-five hundredths angstrom units."

"That's the combination, then! For God's sake, John, don't lose it!"

But Barnett was silent on the other end of the line for a long while.

Finally his voice came through in a hoarse whisper. "I got it too, Hugo! I closed my eyes and con-

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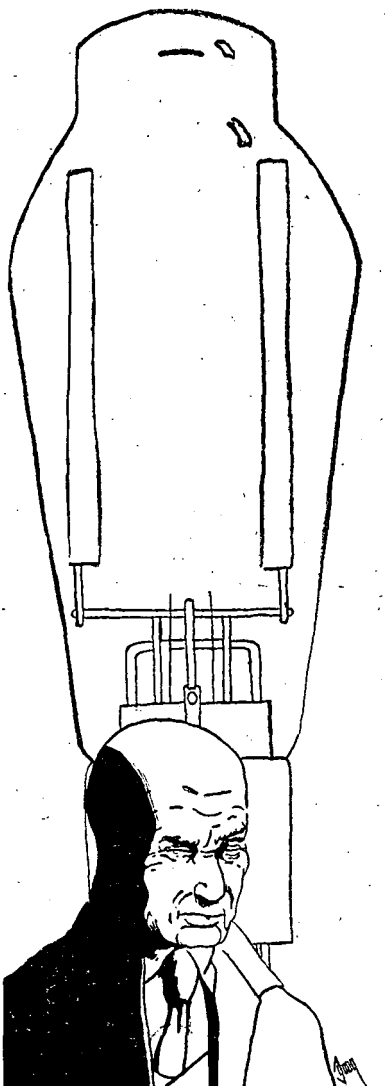
centrated and there it was—a great blaze of light and a tremendous roar of silent music coming through the shielding!"



"Leave it on. I want to try it again. Then I'll be right over."

Vanderloff settled back in his chair, closed his eyes and let the extrasensory emanations pour in. The light was strong and bright, now. And the musical tones were loud and clear, though distorted. But wasn't that as it should be, since he was perceiving through no normal sensory receptor?

Despite his preoccupation, he was suddenly aware of the pain in his chest and he coughed spasmodically, almost disrupting his rapport with the light-sound. But it was a simple thing to dismiss the pain now. By concentrating on the extrasensory, he could push almost all physical sensations completely into the background.

That had been his first success.

There must have been many after that, he suspected almost with conviction. But why couldn't he remember them? And why was he now trapped, so to speak, in the psychic void, frenziedly crowding the light-sound so he wouldn't become lost in his metaphysical infinity? Was there a hypnotic effect to the paraphysical emanations—an effect that held him like a prisoner?

And, perhaps even more important, why did he keep suggesting to himself that there was

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a *real* purpose behind the research—a purpose which he had to hide from Whitmore and, for a while, from Barnett too?

The light and sound began fluctuating wildly again and, with a facility he couldn't remember acquiring, he interpreted the anxiously coded message:

"What's it like, Dr. Vanderloff? Can you hear me? Are you there? Can you answer?"

Questions thundering at him, overshooting and crashing arrogantly out into the impenetrable, featureless infinity.

There was something illogical here, he decided finally. Why should there be questions if he had no way of responding?

Then suddenly he was thinking of a switch—a very delicate and sensitive piece of equipment that had been designed by Barnett. So sensitive, so capable of being activated by the slightest force, that they had enclosed it in a vacuum. The theory was that if psychokinetic power could manipulate any apparatus at all, it would manipulate this one.

And it had!

Perhaps success of the switch lay in the fact that the presence of the metaphysical emanations gave tangible force to volition. Or it may have been that withdrawal from total dependency on the physical senses provided thought with a slight kinetic impetus. At any rate, by concentrating during the experiments, he had consistently been able to throw the switch on and off at will and operate a telegraphic key to complete the two-way communicative bridge.

"Are you there, Hugo? Can you hear?"

"I am here, John."

The light-sound remained steady for a long while—as though his message hadn't been received at all, or as though its reception had occasioned a stunned silence.

"Good God, Hugo! Is it really you?"

Barnett's code came through full of mistakes, almost garbled. And the psychic light and metaphysical sound fluctuated crazily in transmitting it.

"I am here," Vanderloff repeated.

Again the coded response was almost unintelligible. But, allowing for the errors and the apparent frenzy with which it had been transmitted, Vanderloff managed to understand it:

"Can't believe this! Greatest thing that ever happened! Do you realize what this means?"

Vanderloff maintained a perplexed silence. After all, this wasn't the first time the extrasensory experiment had worked, although it might be their initial success with *communicating* through the psychic medium. But then, carrying on a conver-

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sation wasn't that much more spectacular than metaphysical perception itself. So why should Barnett seem so astonished?

"Are you actually there, Hugo? What's it like? What do you see?"

Suddenly a paralyzing realization exploded throughout the structure of his conscious, leaving him mentally numb with terror and despair such as no living man had ever experienced before.

Momentarily he overcame his reaction of utter helplessness—long enough to code a few frantic words:

"Leave it on, John! For God's sake, don't turn it off!"

He had no way of knowing whether his switch triggering impulses had been coherent enough to convey the message. Then suddenly it made no difference whether he had gotten through or not. An overpowering listlessness gripped him and he seemed to be eternally suspended between the infinite void and the now mocking light-sound.

The musical shafts of illumination flickered derisively with Barnett's answering code. But Vanderloff was stricken with the universal uselessness of all things and he didn't even try to interpret the message.

He could almost disregard the light and the sound now. It was, would ever be, he and the interminable night.

For, finally, he knew the *real* purpose of the experiments.

There was the time (toward the end, he remembered now) when he had lain on the cloud of whiteness that had been the hospital bed, his weak, emaciated hands outstretched beside him, his nasal passages burning with an influx of oxygen from the tube that was taped to his face.

Vaguely, he remembered opening his eyes and seeing Barnett standing there, solicitude and anxiety vivid in his stare.

"Why didn't you tell us, Hugo?" the younger man asked.

Vanderloff braced himself against the stabbing malignant pain in his chest. "I was afraid you'd guess why I was so eager to complete the experiments. I thought you'd wash your hands of what could seem like spiritualism masquerading under the cover of science."

Barnett frowned. "I don't understand."

"I wasn't really interested in extrasensory perception. Our research actually was into the phenomena of death and what happens afterward. I didn't want to become a disembodied intellect, lost in a vast, impenetrable blackness. I didn't want to be consigned to the primitive superstitions of heaven or hell. I wanted something better. *I*

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wanted a way to maintain contact with the physical world."

There was no sign of comprehension on the young instructor's face.

"Don't you see that the intellect isn't physical at all?" Vanderloff went on weakly. "The sum total of our experiences—the spiritual *I—can't* cease to exist when the functions of the body come to a halt. The intellect *must* go on. But it's completely isolated from the concrete world because it's deprived of all connections with that world—sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell, vocal power and so forth."

The physicist paused and strained against another surge of pain. Then he went on, even more slowly, more laboriously, "How many intellects must be lost in that sea of psychic dark-from one another! Each an island unto himself. Each an infinite universe in himself. Each forever banished into the solitary, boundless darkness of his own mentality."

There was eager understanding in the other's stare now.

"But the bridge we built will change all that," Vanderloff continued, pausing to cough away his excitement. "The psychic emanations we discovered will be a beacon shining out into the isolated universe of each intellect that learns how to use it. It will orient us to a physical point in the concrete world. It will be our continuing connection with reality—the only means by which we can avert eternal exile."

Vanderloff's head rolled feebly on the pillow and he added in a whisper. "When I go, John, you've *got* to keep the beacon burning."

This, then, was death.

And despite the elaborate measures he had taken to escape total banishment of the intellect in psychic infinity, he realized now how abysmally inadequate was the light.

What benefit could he expect from perpetuating such meager contact with the physical reality of the living? What could he gain other than the hollow realization that he was in communication with the mortal world? Reality had nothing to offer his metaphysical self.

And if he should cling obstinately to the light-sound, the stygian infinity which he had so desperately tried to avoid would always be there waiting for him—waiting for the moment when his mortal counterparts might fail to maintain the beacon.

Then—when the time finally came that the musical light could no longer be sustained, when its last shimmering ray was propagated and its final coda played—then the waiting darkness would be there to claim him. And the

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brief moment he would have resisted ebon infinity would have been as nothing compared with the awful and endless sweep of eternity.

With these considerations, the light-sound which he had embraced so fervently ceased to extend any consolation whatever. For he hadn't escaped eternity at all. He had only forestalled it.

What, then, was his lot? Was he forevermore apart from all other intellects, facing indescribable loneliness in the terrifying darkness of his own psychic universe? Or was there something else waiting for him on the other side of infinity?

Hesitantly, he summoned the gamut of religious beliefs and superstitions, primordial fears and divine aspirations that had marked man's theological evolution. And, in reviewing the whole doctrinal range, he wondered at which point in his own material existence he had rashly abandoned his faith.

(This sudden seizure of near remorse, he asked himself curiously—was it a valid sentiment? Or did it only reflect a sudden deferential fear of whatever Omnipotent Being might be lurking beyond this infinity to extract vengeance?

(Mocking his apprehensive uncertainty, a ripple of derision seemed to course abruptly through the boundless void. Or was it, again, only his imagination?)

But Who *could* be waiting?

God? Jehovah? Baal? The Lord? Zeus? Allah? Christ? The Supreme Being? Shiva? Brahma? Vishnu? Ra? The First Cause? Yahweh? The Almighty Creator? Jupiter? The Holy Ghost? Odin? The Universal Soul? Apollo?

And, after he left the sanctuary of the light-sound, to what might his passage through the interminable night lead?

Heaven? Elysian Fields? The Happy Hunting Grounds? Valhalla? Olympus? St. Peter and the Golden Gates? Nirvana? The Happy Isles? Seventh Heaven?

Or would it be Hell? The Infernal Regions? Everlasting Darkness? Satan? Hades? Charon? The Realms of Pluto? Sheol? Eternal Damnation? The Inferno? Endless Punishment? Purgatory? The River Styx? Limbo? Gehenna?

Whatever awaited him, he could put it off no longer. Even centuries of delay would gain him a reprieve of only insignificant duration compared with the great boundlessness of eternity.

He must go and search out his fate *now*—while paralysis over the discovery of his death held him in a numb grip and made the supreme challenge seem commonplace. And even as he im-

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agined himself abandoning his sanctuary, he was aware that the musical rays were receding into the very depths of infinity, leaving him alone in the intolerable blackness and soundlessness.

Thus he began his search in the vast, vacuous, lightless sea—like Diogenes. Only, he had no lantern to guide him and there was a cosmic uncertainty as to the nature of the Entity or the place which he sought.

After a while (it may have been a few seconds or a few thousand years, there being neither time nor means of measuring it in this new extraphysical existence) he wondered whether he was making any progress through the void.

Then suddenly the very concept of motion in a measureless and featureless infinity seemed supremely ridiculous and it was only then that he realized he was dismally lost.

Frantically, he turned (how, he wondered incidentally, could there be such a thing as a turn with no reference point?) and sought out the musical rays once more. But there was only the impenetrable blackness. He had irretrievably lost the light-sound and now there would be only an eternity of . . . nothing.

With a poignant wistfulness, he thought of the henceforth unattainable communicative bridge to Barnett and Earth—of Earth itself and the fascinating universe of matter and energy that surrounded it. The stars and galaxies; the sun warm and reassuring; the planets and nebulae; even the friendly, half-darkness of the interstellar void.

If he had been God he would have created just such a universe. And he would have placed at its center just such a world as Earth—Earth, with its lofty and splendid mountains and cool-warm breezes, its brilliant clouds and fine white beaches and rich vegetation and tall, swaying trees, its sunlight and moonlight, its stars and its surging seas.

With his unbearable sense of loss came the first shredding effects of panic. And he wondered whether the welling sensation, when it reached its full and interminable climax, might not be the endless hell that awaited him.

But he calmed himself purposely and continued the hopeless search.

Perhaps this *was* his eternal punishment—floundering helplessly in an immeasurable sea of black nothingness throughout all time, while he wished futilely for something, anything—perhaps even the tortures of a seemingly physical hell—to relieve the unbearable monotony.

His soul screamed out its bit-

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ter protest, its frantic insistence that there *must* be something else in the metaphysical afterworld.

But what? And where? And how could he ever find it without light to show the way?

With a torturous urgency, he wished for illumination to dispel the blackness.

And suddenly there *was* light!

A whole universe of blazing, wheeling, surging, shimmering light. The light of thousands of galaxylike masses, comprised of billions of coruscating droplets of fierce illumination.

Great splotches of light in the shape of spinning pinwheels stretching away into what had only seconds ago been a dismal infinity of hopeless nothingness.

Hypnotized by the wonders of his own psychic creation, he inspected what he had wrought.

Around the pinpoints of sparkling light he discerned smaller bodies of nonluminous material that whirled in concentric circles.

And it seemed a foregone conclusion that many of those lesser spheres could be, if he should so decree almost exactly like Earth.

It was infinite fun and he was infinitely pleased, knowing that whenever he chose he could go down and enjoy what he had created, become a part of it.

But it would be so much more interesting to maintain his status as a detached, causative entity and observe the processes he had set in motion.

THE END

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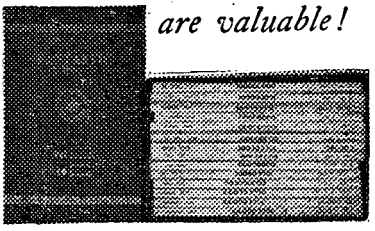

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the eye of aesculapius

By STANLEY R. LEE

Illustrator SUMMERS

Take one manic-depressive navigator, one galactic phenomenon, one psychiatrist, one poker game, and one astrologer; combine to produce a wildly wonderful, strangely touching story by a new writing talent.

SOMETIMES this universe does get monotonous," Pendelton was telling them. "Same old galaxies, same old stars, same old cepheid variables. Know it like the back of my hand. Same old interstices. Listen, you see one interstice you see 'em all."

The captain tossed a black jack on a red queen and pursed his lips, hardly listening. Across the small table Dr. Yarmush was thoughtfully sipping coffee. They were waiting for Third Officer Pendelton to get around to the position report, and from experience the captain had found that eventually the information would be forthcoming, it was all a matter of being patient and understanding. In fact the captain had never been quite so patient and understanding in his whole life, but then he'd never been deep in space before with a manic-depressive navigator on a talking jag. He and Dr. Yarmush waited quietly as Pendel-

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ton rambled on, dabbling in macroscopia, speaking lightly of star systems and nebulas while a strange constellation of his own glittered in his eyes.

"No sir," Pendelton buzzed away, "it's not the most interesting of all possible universes but, like the man says, it's the only one we've got."

The captain tossed a red ten on the assaulting jack and sighed. For the good of the ship he was trying hard to maintain a psycho-Christian attitude. "Honor thy neighbor's neurosis," he kept telling himself. "Trespass not upon his castles in the air . . ."

"You may also be interested to know," Pendelton was saying by way of peroration, "that all is more or less well in the universe. I'd say it's pretty much the same way we left it last time, ignoring of course the red shiftings, starlight tide accretions and a few recent supernovae. And, let's see now—oh yes, I almost forgot, we're on schedule and course."

The captain breathed quietly, not wishing to disturb the delicate equilibrium of silence. He left the table and strolled slowly to the forward port. He was going to have to ask a question, there was no way out of it. He pointed to a speck of light. "You're sure?" he said. "Can you give me a yes or no 100% assurance that this is the one we've come for, Cassiopeia's Wedding Ring? When you consider our intentions, Pendelton, there must be no doubt whatso—" He stopped because a look of rapture had stolen over Pendelton's countenance.

"How odd," the third officer said with intensity, his eyebrows knitting together, his nostrils flaring. "And grand too! The one we've come for, you said, meaning a star. A star!" He wheeled on a graceful pivot and addressed Yarmush. "I find that rather titillating, don't you doctor? I mean, isn't it rather remarkable for a mere man to be able to say something like that? It isn't as though he were using poetic license, which would be bad in a captain. No, by God. He said we've come for a star and he meant it!"

The captain sat down opposite Yarmush and poured himself some coffee.

"Not being a navigator," Pendelton continued, a marked gaiety in his voice, a certain delicate abandon in his limbs, "I imagine one part of the void looks pretty much like any other, Cassiopeia's Wedding Ring could be almost any seventh magnitude star. I realize what this must do to your orientation, adrift in the universe this way. Ah, the universe. Know what Euripides called the universe? 'A song sung by an idiot dancing down the

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wind.' Isn't that marvelous? And we're in the middle of it! However, Euripides to the contrary notwithstanding I assert that the heavenly body we are now approaching is in fact Cassiopeia's Wedding Ring, that various and sundry of my instruments all agree quite closely in this and that, not being a seat of the pants navigator by any stretch of the imagination, I base all my decisions on a majority vote of the instruments."

The captain and Yarmush stared into each other's eyes for a moment.

"Will there be anything else?" Pendelton asked, beaming.

Without looking at Pendelton's glowing face, and not daring to hope for a precise answer, the captain said: "How far off are we?"

"Six hours," Pendelton replied promptly. "I try to be prepared for these little briefings; I realize how utterly dependent you are on numbers. Out in space that's all one really has, isn't it? In space one is, after all, not much more than one's coordinates." He took out a sheetful of figures and placed them on the table between the captain and Yarmush. "We must maintain this course for that number of hours," he said, pointing to the entries. "You don't have to, of course, I'm only suggesting it. Then, if you're in the mood, you can bring her around to such and such a bearing at which point you'll be 45 minutes away from firing time. Three quarters of an hour later you may, if ready and so inclined, fire."

The captain sighed: he had his course on paper. "That'll be all, lieutenant," he said.

There was an unnecessarily sharp click of heels and the navigator was gone.

A bemused silence followed.

"Well, doctor?" the captain said to Yarmush.

"Hmmmmmmmmmm."

"For three years the most sullen individual in the Space Corps," the captain said, letting off some of his psycho-Christian steam. "Never get a word out of him! Morose in the morning, sulky in the afternoon, surly at night. Now, this time out, instead of his usual plain peevishness, I've got an *elated* third officer on my hands."

"He certainly *seems* happy," Yarmush remarked, idly turning the pages of Pendelton's service folder.

"Happy? He's practically been *tittering* for the last week and a half."

"It's interesting though that you never requested a psychiatric verdict on him while he was *un*happy."

"I don't know what that's supposed to mean, all I know is my

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navigator's got the giggles and I don't like it. There's a lot of things about him I don't like, such as this, for instance." The officer pounced on Pendelton's dossier. "Look here. He was along on the first Mars flight. Got appendicitis two hours before touchdown. The first men on the planet Mars spent their first three hours there assisting at an operation. Pendelton himself never left his bunk until three days after they were back in space."

"Appendicitis is appendicitis," Yarmush remarked reasonably.

"And look here," the captain continued, not swayed in the least. "On the third Mars flight—when my navigator finally managed to get outside the ship, at least—he was *left behind* on takeoff. A quarter of a million dollars in fuel was spent going back for him."

"But it says here," Yarmush said, "that it was a crew error. They all thought Pendelton's spare space suit had Pendelton inside it."

"For Pendelton to have forgotten about the takeoff time was an inexcusable blunder."

"But he'd found what he believed to be a *human artifact*. A discovery of such incalculable importance would make anyone forgetful."

"Except that his famous vase was a natural formation. A piece of stone fashioned by natural processes and having the appearance of a man-made implement. If you ask me the whole idea was nature's way of getting rid of a factory defective: I'm talking about Pendelton. But *that* captain decided to waste the taxpayer's money."

"I saw that vase in the museum," Yarmush said. "It does look astoundingly like a vase."

"If you are seriously going to try and rationalize *that* career away," the captain replied, "you'll not have time for much else on this voyage. On page 40 you'll find that he had Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever on the first Venus flight."

The captain turned away and became intensely busy. He did not really enjoy talking about the third officer.

Yarmush slowly closed the dossier and rested his arms on it.

"Then what's he got to be so happy about?" he mused.

Effervescing quietly, Pendelton leaned on the catwalk railing and gazed out through carbonated eyes at the activity around him.

"Amazing," he said to Second Officer Spencer. "What will man think of next?"

The huge torpedo inched past them, suspended on chains from a ceiling trolley, gently swaying high over the heads of the crew

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members below. "Here I've been thinking all along that everything worth while has already been invented," Pendelton said, "and they come up with this thing, a clever little gadget for which the word 'nuclear' would be a mild euphemistic description. Poor Cassiopeia."

"Yeah, sure, some other time maybe," Spencer said, moving on down the catwalk, following the slow progress of the missile.

"You're worried!" Pendelton said, pointing a long gracefully tapered finger at him. "Don't try to hide it, I can see. Listen, Spencer, nothing will age a man faster than worrying. And why be concerned, you're one of the lucky types, didn't you know?"

"No, I didn't know that," Spencer said distantly.

"You exude success the way other men sweat. My friend, you are what I call a silver spooner, born with a 114 piece set of matched sterling silver utensils spilling out over the operating table. Torn from a womb? Nonsense. You were gently eased out of a cornucopia while your cloven-hooved physician performed on a syrinx. In other, perhaps less scientific times than these, you would be described as having been born under a lucky star."

The second officer looked around at the shining smiling face of the third officer and said nothing. Then he lit a cigarette as the breech of the port firing tube was slammed shut on the first of the two torpedoes.

Pendelton shook his head in admiration.

"Think of all the twitching that's going on inside this hull," he said. "All the coming and going and doing, out here in big zero-space. Can't you just see a great big black puddle of nothingness and-*zip*-we go flipping by stretching all the warps and ejecting *solid concentrated urine* out the back for power? It all goes to disprove, as I see it, what Dostoyevsky said about man. 'Man grows used to everything, the scoundrel.' That's what he said and I question this, Spencer, I seriously do."

The second torpedo floated past them.

"Now we're going to blow up a star," Pendelton said. "Diffuse it over a couple of thousand cubic light years. Star light, star bright, first star I've pulverized tonight. And why? Listen to me Spencer, this is interesting, it bears. After we blow up Cassiopeia's Wedding Ring, Pluto will start spinning in toward the sun on account of it will then have a gently unbalanced set of gravitational forces pushing on it. Twenty five years from now someone'll blast another star into oblivion and old cold Pluto will take up a warm stable orbit

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in close to the sun, in with the habitable planets, the cute green little sociable ones."

Spencer's face congested into a squint as the torpedo, for no apparent reason, began to oscillate in two planes at once.

"Of course this *is* a toying with the divine order, an implication that He hadn't got it quite right the first time, but then who's perfect?"

There was the quick brittle snapping of metal, a remote little sound that seemed to come from nowhere in particular but suddenly one of the chains wasn't there anymore.

The two officers high on the slender catwalk saw one end of the huge torpedos fall in free flight while the other spun at the end of its tether, and when all the individual motions had coalesced into a resultant—the missile was swinging in a ponderous arc headed straight at them. When it hit Pendelton and Spencer were shot away from each other, flying apart as the catwalk under their feet exploded upwards followed by the thrusting torpedo itself. There was a tremendous *clang* as the projectile heaved ceilingward and resonantly destroyed a tank of heavy machine oil fastened there, then swung back through the deluge of oil to the far side of the ship—the outer skin—where it drew a broad black stroke on the paint, coming within an ounce-second of fatiguing the metal, saved perhaps only by its impromptu, self-lubricating oil bath.

The torpedo whisked back and forth across the room, playing itself out.

Second Officer Spencer lifted his face out of a pool of oil and thoroughly disgorged his last two meals, the teetering catwalk swaying dangerously with each convulsion of his stomach. As he slowly and delicately rose to his hands and knees, his ears roaring, his stomach still twitching, the structure beneath him audibly collapsing with each passing second, he heard a voice. The voice, apparently, was talking to him, a matter of fact sing-song voice that didn't seem to be a part of the stomach-wretching oil-spattered world.

"Now my point about Dostoyevsky is this," the voice was saying.

The second officer turned to find Pendelton's eager face a foot away, his kneeling body dripping oil, his eyes incandescent, his smile milk-white framed in lubricant.

"Now don't start worrying," Pendelton interrupted himself. "You're a silver spooner remember and we cancel each other out. As far as results are concerned nothing *serious* has happened.

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But listen, Spencer, doesn't it strike you as being an appealing little gesture of man's to play tiddlywinks with planets in order to make room for his kids?"

The torpedo-pendulum that had almost tossed them into the pit of space whistled slowly back and forth through the dead silent air of the ship.

"Stay right where you are," Spencer ordered weakly. "Don't move an inch, don't even breathe, until I'm on that ladder."

"But all I wanted to say," the navigator replied eagerly, a drop of black oil rolling off his nose, "was that this goes to prove my *point*. My thesis is that man can and does put up with anything —but only for so long. There's a limit. There comes a time when he gets pushed to a point beyond which he has nothing to lose and he becomes aware that he has nothing to lose. Oh, nothing important anyway. That's when he responds, when he moves planets for example, that's when the wild things get done, the wonderful things!"

Spencer disappeared down the ladder.

"The really exquisite things too," Pendelton whispered ecstatically after him.

"I think you're wasting your time doing it this way," Pendelton told Dr. Yarmush.

They were alone in the officer's wardroom. Yarmush was seated at the writing table while the navigator, his features alternating between serenity and enchantment, slowly wandered around the room with hands behind his back.

"Not that I'm trying to tell you your business," Pendelton went on, "but insanity is relative, isn't it? It's a deviation from the mean. And what, I laughingly inquire, is the mean? It's what you say it is. It's a matter of definition, of opinion. In fact it's another one of those things that are determined by the good old democratic process. Now if I were you I'd go visit with the crew and take a vote: Yes or No, Is Pendelton's Clutch Slipping? Be far more efficient than examining me, after all what do *I* have to say about it?"

The psychiatrist imperturbably lit a cigar. "All I asked you for was a chat," he said.

"But you do think I'm mad, don't you? Come on, confess now, you do, don't you? Just a little?"

"Would you really expect me to say so if I thought so?"

Pendelton smirked. "Pretty fast on your feet. I suppose you get that way from habitually dealing with screwballs."

"If you keep insisting that you're nuts I may start believing you," Yarmush warned, noticing at the same time that

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there was a quality of vigilance, of wariness, about Pendelton which he'd seen before but hadn't consciously identified. The navigator, in his apparently casual stroll around the room was *checking* things, sometimes with only a glance, sometimes with a quick movement of his hand.

"Frankly I'm interested in why you're apparently so happy," Yarmush said. "That's a curious thing for a psychiatrist to be concerned with, isn't it?"

"You don't have to apologize," Pendelton answered, climbing up on the dining table. He checked the ceiling light fixture for solidity, then hopped down and tightened the bolts that held the chairs in place during takeoffs. "Go ahead," he said, "it's a long trip, nothing much for you to do, analyze away."

Yarmush watched in silence as Pendelton's eyes wandered ceaselessly over the room looking for things to inspect. "If you don't like it in here we can go somewhere else and talk," he said softly.

Pendelton stopped. "Suit yourself," he replied non-committally.

They strolled toward the control cabin.

"Let me put it this way," Yarmush said. "Do you know why you're happy or do you just . . . feel happy?"

"Nice of you to ask. I'm surprised you didn't immediately conclude Pendelton is riding his way through space perched on top of a manic crest. I mean, with my record, what could I possibly have to be consciously, rationally happy about?"

"You haven't had much in the way of luck," the doctor admitted and then stopped with his hand on the door. "*That's* why you were checking everything back there."

For reply, Pendelton entered the control room and gathered up all loose objects lying around. He stashed them away in a cabinet and locked it. "In a few minutes those torpedoes will be fired," he said. "The ship will jar. If I am standing near anything loose it will fall and hit me on the head."

"I see," Yarmush said slowly. "You believe you're afflicted with bad luck."

"Shall I take out my record and show you?"

"No, no," the doctor said hastily. "Once is enough."

"The important thing to be gleaned from that living record of disaster," Pendelton said, "is that while you can't expect to ever win, to triumph, it is at least possible to earn a draw. Hell, I'm alive!"

"Certainly."

"There's nothing certain about it at all. It's highly uncer-

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tain. You don't think I've survived to the age of 28 playing it by ear, do you? Listen, I do more staff work crossing a busy intersection than all of Supreme Headquarters in Washington, D. C., does in a week. I'm a genius at anticipating catastrophes. Where you sail out across a street with a few seconds thought I create a detailed campaign with sixteen possible alternatives. If a flaming pit opened at my feet I'd be ready for it!"

"I find that a singularly healthy attitude," the psychiatrist said, scratching his neck. "Weird and yet healthy."

"I've survived for more than a quarter of a century," Pendelton said proudly, "every day of which has been a pitched battle against circumstance."

Yarmush began taking notes. "What's your explanation for this?" he said.

"The Eye of Aesculapius."

"The eye of—"

"A-e-s-c-u-l-a-p-i-u-s," Pendelton spelled.

Yarmush smiled sheepishly. "Go on," he said.

"Odd creature that I am," Pendelton began, pacing warily, "I was born under the Eye of Aesculapius, a seventh magnitude star in a non-zodiacal constellation. It is perhaps significant in our respective life lines, doctor, that Aesculapius was the first physician. I first became aware of the Eye at the age of five. It seemed to be a stern Eye then because I didn't have my present planning ability. I was buffeted about, completely in its toils. My toys literally destroyed themselves, my clothing ripped as if by magic, my knees—the achilles heel of a child—were scarred and torn beyond belief by the time I was eight. I might have spent my childhood as the surgical plaything of the young medical student Aesculapius, he of the laughing sadistic Eye."

"But wasn't this a fanciful notion of a young boy? As you grew older didn't you lose this belief?"

"Not at all," Pendelton replied. "My horoscope was my service record in embryo. Astrologists reacted to it as you did, only *before* it happened."

"And it still seems possible to you, with your scientific education, that a distant star can influence the course of your life?"

"Why not? Every object in the universe exerts a gravitational force on every other object. Perhaps my blood ebbs and rips in accordance with the movements of Aesculapius. He flares upwinks, I should say—and the force is communicated to me instantly. What happens? Perhaps my pituitary secrets an extra drop that day. Or other people's

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pituitaries. Anyway, why bother with theories, I'm an empiricist."

There was a sudden jolt as the torpedoes fired.

The empiricist - navigator leaped across the room and sat on the psychiatrist's lap. As the ship rolled, a rack-mounted radar modulator weighing 250 pounds slid from its compartment and thrust out into the room as far as its rollers would permit. It crashed to a stop at exactly where Pendelton's head had been two seconds earlier. Pendelton grinned down at Yarmush and patted him on the shoulder. "Took a guess and figured you were lucky." He stood up and strolled nonchalantly to the port. "The Eye is squinting now," he said, looking out at the dark universe.

Yarmush cleared his throat. "Believe I'll lie down awhile before dinner."

Pendelton spoke in a clinical tone. "Take two aspirins and start calling it coincidence as soon as possible. Be on your feet again in no time."

Beep.

The captain had won 37 dollars at poker. The wardroom intercom was beeping satisfactorily at half-minute intervals, meaning that his two cobalt torpedoes were reaching out for their target but hadn't quite touched it yet. Happily laying down a full house, the captain hauled in an attractive pile of money that had moments before been the property of Dr. Yarmush and Second Officer Spencer.

Beep.

He was joyfully contemplating which procedural step he would take first in order to rid himself of Pendelton when the navigator entered the wardroom, beaming, and announced: "Torpedoes on course, on schedule, deal me in."

Now that the ship was on its homeward course, the captain's psycho-Christian attitude was forgotten. "We're playing poker," he said sarcastically. "For money."

"What else matters?" the third officer replied with an absolutely straight face.

Beep.

"I won 600 dollars off you at blackjack three years ago," the captain said. "You complained about it for weeks. I got the impression you didn't like to lose."

"Not at all," Pendelton said, rubbing his hands in a business-like manner and picking up the deck. "I said that I didn't object one bit to losing. I only objected to losing *all* the time. There was no element of chance or gambling. I always lost." He cut the cards and then expertly riffled them with a loud clatter. "Deal,"

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he said, grinning, to Yarmush.

Beep.

"You're sure?" the psychiatrist replied. "You feel . . . lucky?"

Trying to force away a smile with clenched lips—so that it turned into a rather obnoxious gloat—Pendelton nodded.

He lost eight hands in a row.

On the ninth hand he didn't even bother to look at his cards: they stayed face down on the table and Pendelton showed no interest in them whatsoever. But when the captain opened for a quarter, Pendelton kicked it a dollar, drawing strange looks from the three men, which he avoided by casually glancing around at the far corners of the room.

"How many?" Yarmush said.

"Two."

"One."

"I'm pat."

They looked at the navigator.

"You can't very well be pat," the captain explained elaborately, "if you haven't looked at your cards."

"Sir," was the reply, accompanied by a very bland expression, "if the captain *orders* me to look at them I will, otherwise—"

"Bet a double sawbuck," the captain replied.

"I'm out," Second Officer Spencer said.

"Bet 83 dollars," Pendelton said. He sat back and folded his arms, then sucked in his cheeks to keep from grinning.

Dr. Yarmush cleared his throat. "I'm out," he said, embracing the better part of valor.

The captain took out his wallet and prepared to do some poker playing.

The betting soared in a crazy manic spiral.

The second officer and Yarmush watched with swiveling heads as the first and third officers alternately tossed larger and larger sums of money onto the table.

The captain signed a check to cover a bet of $777.77 and said grimly: "Call."

Three heads inched towards Pendelton's cards.

"Oh, incidentally," the navigator remarked. "I don't know if you've noticed, but the mission is over. Scratch one star."

They listened for the missing beep tone.

"It stopped right before this hand was dealt out," Pendelton told them. Then he started to laugh.

It was a surprise to hear the navigator laugh. It was an innocent laugh and a sane laugh and it made a happy sound in the wardroom. It even seemed to have an affect on Pendelton's countenance, the glow vanishing as if it had become audible and

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was thereby exorcised. As the three men watched, Pendelton hilariously coasted down from his manic eminence.

Dr. Yarmush slowly got to his feet.

"Oh my *God*," he said.

Pendelton rocked in his chair and pounded the table.

"Listen," Yarmush said, shaking him by the shoulder. "You couldn't have, I don't believe it, you wouldn't *dare*."

Pendelton tried to answer and drooled over his chin.

"The Eye of Aesculapius?" Yarmush asked.

"What's the Eye of Aesculapius got to do with us?" the captain asked, looking from one to the other.

Pendelton stopped laughing for two seconds.

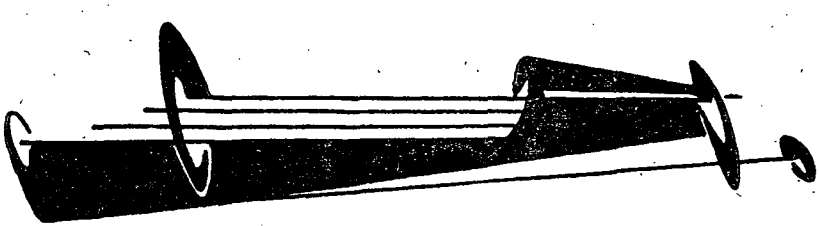
"It's closed," he said, and then was off again, soaring in a special dimension of his own.

"What's he talking about?" the captain said, but the psychiatrist didn't hear him, he was turning over Pendelton's cards, and the only sound in the wardroom was the sound of Pendelton liberated, Pendelton a free agent, Pendelton the lucky, Pendelton the silver spooner, as the cards came up, one after another: ten of spades, jack of spades, queen of spades, king of spades . . .

When they got back to earth the captain instituted court-martial proceedings. But the papers kept getting lost somehow and he had to do it over and over again. After a while he began to see the point. And Pendelton was no longer around to remind him of the incident. He was given a promotion that was intended for a Lieutenant Pederson, along with the command of his own ship. And the truth is that things went pretty much his own way from then on because he was a man without a star.

There wasn't an astrologer in the galaxy who could touch him.

THE END



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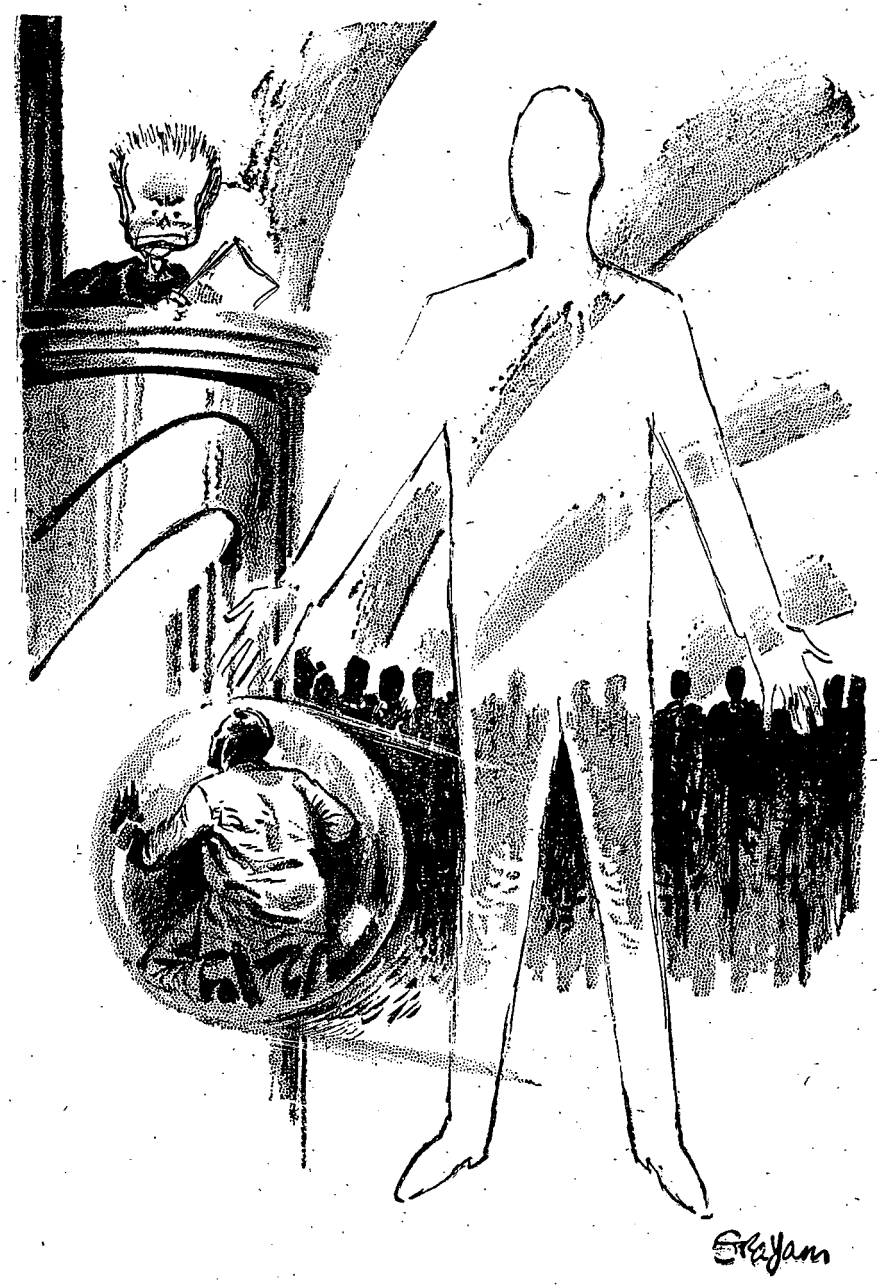

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At the end of the future sit the Guardians, playing their clerkish games with Fate while people vanish and memories die. Then one man decided to fight them.

REMEMBER ME, PETER SHEPLEY

By CHARLES W. RUNYON

WE LEFT the office at six, Mary and I.

Spring was in the air, Chicago style. Clouds lay like a dirty tent stretched across the building tops. Cars crept through the Loop with a sound like grease frying in a skillet.

Mary pointed. "Look, Pete, you got a ticket."

I saw it on the windshield, red and damp among the beads of moisture. "Leave it."

She stepped off the curb and pulled the ticket free of the wiper. As she bent her head to read it, a strand of ash-blonde hair escaped from the cowl of her raincoat and hung down like a question mark. "Ten dollars for overtime," she moaned. "We worked too late."

"Tear it up," I said.

"No, I'll take it down tomorrow, save you a penalty."

I held out my hand. She hesitated, frowning, then gave it to me. I tore it in half and dropped the pieces into the running gutter. Then I opened her door.

"Pete—" She paused, an orange-painted lip caught between her teeth. Then she gathered her raincoat and skirt in her hand and slid inside.

I should've let her pay it, I thought as I walked around the car. She was a good secretary. She'd wanted to do something to make up for what had gone wrong during the day. But she'd mentioned tomorrow, and it hurt. Because tomorrow was the end of me, Peter Shepley.

I got in, started the engine, and waited for a gap in the traffic that oozed toward the outer drive. I glimpsed my face in the rear-view mirror: Peter Shepley, bright coin with two

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sides. Heads, you had a corporation attorney who got results if you could pay for them; flip the coin and you found a political reformer who kicked sacred cows all over Cook County. Handsome, no. Under the pulled-down hat, the face was too lean and the lips too tight. And the black eyebrows that met across the nose . . . someday a political cartoonist might have had a ball with the brows. But not now, never will it be possible.

I saw a car-sized gap and let the big Lincoln go. We slipped in and beat the light on State. I felt better. I would miss this, the smooth power of an expensive car.

We were going north on the drive, past the Yacht Club, when Mary spoke. "Are you still worrying about those easement files on United Oil?"

"It was your rule, Mary, not to talk shop in transit."

"Well, let's break it." Her voice was belligerent at first, then concerned. "You're worried about something, Pete. I can tell after four years."

I could smell damp fabric mingled with Mary's perfume. I would miss this, too, the sound and smell pf Mary . . . driving home tired but comfortable while she filled my ears with youthful, eager talk.

"It isn't United Oil." I managed to laugh. "It was a shock, though, to ask for a firm's file and be told they'd done business elsewhere for eight years. Put it down to wishful thinking."

"You never made mistakes before, Pete. You've always been . . . ahead of everybody."

I wanted to tell her I hadn't been mistaken; that only six months ago we'd spent several nights at the office trying to push through their right of way easement. Then, she'd said she wouldn't forget the case, because that night I'd started driving her home from work.

But she'd forgotten. So had my partners. And the United Oil people—I'd gone over to convince them, and they'd called my partners to confirm my identity. They didn't remember either.

"Is it the campaign posters?" asked Mary. "It *was* stupid, putting them up with that big blank where your picture belonged. How could it happen?"

I forced another laugh. "Just a printer's error, Mary. The metal cut came loose from the wood backing."

That wasn't true either. Metal didn't pull loose; not with all those nails they put in. And no printer could make five thousand such errors on a hand press, then deliver them to the customer.

The bridge was choked by the usual rush-hour bottleneck. I slowed and stopped, but I felt like tearing through and the hell with everything. Let them find my body at the bottom of the river. That would be one way to spit in the Guardians' eyes.

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"I know," said Mary. "It was the college transcript they lost."

"They didn't lose it, Mary. Remember? They proved I'd never gone to school at Chicago University."

The bottleneck broke up and I eased forward, stopped, then moved again. It was several minutes before we were out of the jam and floating free along the Gold Coast. I glanced at Mary, sitting straight in the seat, her small hands folded in her lap, palm up. She'd pushed back the cowl of her raincoat, revealing ash-blonde hair combed back over her ears. She was frowning, and I knew she hadn't been satisfied with my answers. Uncertainties had no place in Mary's life; she'd probe until she found the answer.

But I couldn't give it to her. How do you tell someone you've been sentenced to a punishment worse than death? That in something like thirty hours, you'll not have existed at all?

"It must be your campaign. You're worried about your television speech tomorrow night."

Tomorrow. That word again. I set my teeth to keep from growling at her. "I'm not worried about anything," I said evenly. "I'm just tired."

That seemed to satisfy her. She leaned back in the seat and sighed. "You do too much, Peter Shepley. You're thirty-five and you've pushed yourself ahead of men twice your age. You should let the poor guys catch up, take a vacation."

"I will, Mary, very soon." I pulled an envelope from my pocket and gave it to her. "I want you to keep this for me."

I heard her tear open the envelope and gasp. "A cashier's check for . . . *a hundred and thirty-eight thousand dollars?* Where in the world—?"

"I cashed in my life insurance and sold my stocks. Don't ask me why. Open an account in your name, first thing tomorrow. Keep the money until I ask you for it."

"Pete, couldn't your relatives—?"

"I have no relatives." I tried to say it lightly, but I remembered my visit to Fort Madison three weeks ago. My father had told me, politely at first, that he had no son and I must have the wrong Judge Shepley. I mentioned the old Ford we had in '37, a German shepherd that had been run over, a cruise to Mackinac Island in '40; yes, he remembered. I must be a former neighbor, he said. I mentioned the time he told me: *"Pete, if you use your brain right, I'll become known as the father of Peter Shepley."* At that point, he decided he was being staked out for some kind of shakedown, and he'd ordered me out of the house I grew up in.

The pain of that still lingered. I turned off the outer drive at Foster and swept down and through the underpass. A minute later I stopped in front of Mary's apartment house; a red

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brick building cut off from the lake by a row of plush new apartments.

She sat still, looking down at the check. "Why are you giving me this money . . . now?"

The truth was that I'd already lost fifty thousand as my name disappeared from stock certificates. I felt somebody should benefit from my major talent—making money. To Mary, I said: "I'm . . . involved in a tax situation. If anything happens to me, use the money for whatever you want."

It had been the wrong thing to say. Her eyes widened. "Pete, what are you going to do?"

"Right now I'm going home." I smiled and squeezed her hand. "Later I plan to work on that speech. I'll call you if I need help."

She put the check in her purse, clicked it shut, and slid to the door. "You call me, Pete. You need help, whether you admit it or not."

I lived four blocks north in a lake front joint with a doorman. My name was still on my mailbox and my key still opened my apartment. I tossed my hat on my mahogany desk, unlocked a drawer and drew out a black folder. It was worn from much handling and the title was faded:

GUARDIANS VS. PETER SHEPLEY
(Defendant's Copy)

It was futile to keep reading the damn thing, looking for an escape clause. There weren't any. Actually, it hadn't even been a trial; the Guardians had presented it in those terms so I'd be sure to understand. I wondered whether, if I'd been an engineer, they'd have presented it in the form of a blue-print. That would be in character; the Guardians weren't evil—just misguided like children who smother kittens.

I opened the folder and read:

Defendant: Peter Shepley, temporarily extracted for examination pursuant to complaint of sector Guardian.

Temporal position: 1959, local.

Spatial position: Chicago, Earth.

Mental condition: Schizoid. Tests revealed an element of genius, deeply suppressed.

Physical condition: Height 6′ 2″. Weight 160. Below normal due to chronic stomach ailment. Otherwise condition normal upon extraction. However, defendant attempted to escape detention cube and injured nose. Resultant hemorrhage still in progress when defendant appeared before Examiner. Transcript of trial follows.

The Installation must have been the size of Kansas. In my transparent cubicle I'd streaked through a thousand miles of corridor, going from one lab to another. Now the cubicle was creeping through a hall that would've made the stockyards auditorium look like a cracker-

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box. Behind me, the cubicles diminished into a thin ribbon. The nearest cubicle held a creature with purple wings and a drooping beak. He looked like a chicken caught out in the rain. Beyond him was a three-foot woolly caterpillar with ornamental ribbons attached to its drooping antennae.

I couldn't stand so I squatted on my heels and tried to staunch my noseblood with the tail of my pajamas. I wanted a cigaret, then remembered I wouldn't be carrying them in my pajamas even if the doctor hadn't ordered me off the weed. My stomach felt like I'd swallowed a ball of fire.

The cubicle stopped. A black-robed figure regarded me from a waist-high dais. His round head perched on narrow shoulders like a pumpkin on a stick. Yellow hair stood up in tufts like shocks of ripe wheat. A curved line bisected the lower part of his face, as though someone had drawn a smile with heavy charcoal. But there was nothing funny about him. Pale yellow eyes studied me without blinking; the mouth opened and words came through a grill at the top of my cubicle.

Examiner: Peter Shepley, you are charged with four attempts to thwart your life-pattern, thereby jeopardizing the pattern of your world—

Defendant: In a minute, Fatface, I'll pinch myself and make you disappear.

Examiner: I assure you this is not a dream. Remove that garment from your nose and speak clearly into the translator.

Def: My nose is bleeding, you pompous pumpkin-head. What translator?

Ex: The disc set in the front of your cubicle. Be warned, your continued disregard for procedure will weigh adversely in my final decision. Now, Guardian—

Def: I don't understand the charges.

Ex: Your understanding is not required. Guardian will now present the evidence.

Def: Don't I get to enter a plea?

Ex: Guardian will now—

Def: I'm a lawyer. I can defend myself.

Ex: Guardian, where in the Ultimate Pattern—? There you are. Present the first exhibit.

The Guardian was a coarser, heavier replica of the Examiner. His green uniform was cut to allow for two bulges in the front of his body which looked like two basketballs under his clothing, one above the other. He stepped onto the dais wheeling a bicycle. He rested it on its kickstand and stood at attention slightly behind the examiner.

Ex: Do you recall this conveyance, Peter Shepley?

Def: A bicycle. What kind of evidence—?

Ex: Answer the question.

Def: My God, that circular oil spot on the seat . . . it used to be mine.

Ex: Used to Be?

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Def: Somebody stole it when I was ten, just after I'd repaired—

Ex: What kind of repairs?

Def: Lord, that was twenty-five years . . . wait, I was starting on my paper route when the chain broke. I put in a link, but that made the chain too long. It was dark by then. I took off the back wheel, sort of . . . jiggered the sprocket, gave the chain a half-twist, reassembled—

Guardian: If Your Excellency will excuse me, I'd like to point out that he'd invented the interspatial warp drive. Such a device does not appear in the pattern until his year 2010, when an itinerant Brazilian by the name of—

Def: Listen, that bike disappeared out from under me before my feet touched the pedals.

Ex: You'd have taken a very long ride.

Guardian: And set your civilization ahead seventy-five years.

Def: I don't give a damn. I had to lug those papers—

Ex: Guilty. Proceed to the next charge, Guardian.

Guardian: He next attempted to distort the pattern of war, Exalted One. Regard the pattern: Here, the Macedonian phalanx; there the longbow at Crecy; then comes Clausewitz and his concept of total war, followed by Hitler's *Blitzkreig* and the atom bomb. All in order. In 1951, however, I found this diagram in the defendant's journal.

Ex: By the Ultimate Pattern! The Sardok Tactic! Defendant, do you recog—?

Def: Let's cut the red tape. Find me guilty and let's all go out for coffee.

Ex: Answer the question.

Def: Sure, I recognize the bloodstain. It's the journal I carried in Korea.

Ex: And the diagrams?

Def: Mine, as you damn well know. My platoon was in a bunker surrounded by a Chinese regiment. They were closing in, when it suddenly occurred to me how a small force could overcome a larger, encircling force. I was diagramming our movement for the first sergeant when our bunker was hit by a mortar shell. I got a piece of it in the stomach, woke up as a prisoner, and the journal was gone.

Guardian: I extracted it while he was unconscious, Excellency.

Ex: Peter Shepley, in two hundred years Sardok will devise this tactic and rule in tyranny for a thousand years. Would you blight your world as Sardok will blight the galaxy? Answer that.

Def: You can stop Sardok the same way you stopped me.

Ex: But Sardok fits the pattern. You do not. Surely you knew you were not meant to invent the—

Guardian: Excellency, if I may point out, the creature knows nothing of the pattern, nor of Sardok. His people do not regard the trough of time as we do. They divide the current into two sections, past and future,

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separated by a thin, impervious barrier called the present.

Ex: I have never heard—

Guardian: His people have only recently been included in the pattern, Excellency, for that reason. Each individual is divided. One part sees only the past, the other perceives the future. They cannot communicate through the barrier of the present. Except in rare cases, each part is ignorant of the other and regards himself as the whole.

Ex: Which part is the defendant?

Guardian: The past. It is nearly impossible to extract both at once, though we don't know why.

Ex: Who introduced these . . . fantastic creatures into the pattern?

Guardian: The Founder, Excellency.

Ex: A wise decision. Now, I must render judgment—

Guardian: If I may point out, Excellency, there are two more charges.

Ex: Repetitions, no doubt, of the previous two. He is obviously a chronic meddler who will infract again—

Def: Now wait, you're getting steamed up over things that didn't happen. I didn't ride the damn bike. I didn't use the Sardok tactic—

Ex: We must preserve the pattern. He who disturbs it loses his place. Guardian, return him to his time. If he distorts the pattern again, extract him—both of him. Permanently.

Guardian: If I may point out, Excellency, he will infract again on April 16, 1960. The exact time is not clear.

E: Then extract him now.

Guardian: Excellency, the extraction is a difficult one. It must occur simultaneously in past and future. Besides, his disordered world is such that each individual scatters the relics of his being in an unpredictable manner. An infinity of personal contacts must be located and erased before total extraction.

Ex: Very well, Guardian, you have a year.

Guardian: If I may point out, my furlough—

Ex: You have pointed out enough. My decision is final. Next case.

The transcript ended.

I returned it to the desk, remembering how I'd abruptly gone to sleep and awakened to see the familiar pattern of my own ceiling.

Tomorrow, I thought, would be April 16, 1960. I wished the transcript had revealed the exact time and nature of my next infraction. Maybe I'd set out to repair a clock and accidentally invent a time machine. Or I'd mix an omelette and come up with a miracle food that made men immortal. My flashes of genius took me by surprise, no less than the Guardians.

I spent the next hour searching the apartment for signs of the Guardian's work. I never saw *him*, but the signs had ap-

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peared every day for the last three months.

First, my name disappeared from the inside covers of my law books. Then an article I'd written on military justice disappeared, replaced by a piece on the legal aspects of polygamy that had fit the space perfectly and looked as though it had always been in the magazine. The sweat bands of my hats turned up clean of the initials I'd inscribed in indelible pencil. A monogram, embroidered by my mother, disappeared from a gift bathrobe. A shirt lost a cigaret burn, and a pair of dungarees turned up clean of paint stains which had resisted four years of laundering.

I'd marked the books again, initialed the hats, burned the shirt and slopped paint on the dungarees. Next day, there was no sign I'd touched them. For three months, I'd gone on returning objects to their original condition; the Guardian had gone on removing signs of my existence, gaining a few each day.

Today it was the bill of sale for my car, a handball trophy from the athletic club, and a table lighter Mary had given me. I picked it up, remembering how the gift had taken me by surprise Christmas before last. I'd rushed out to Field's and snatched a bottle of perfume. I couldn't recall its name, but Mary had worn that kind ever since.

The lighter, I saw, had lost a dent I'd put there. The inscription, *To PS from MK*, was gone. And sometime today, Mary Kennedy would have forgotten about the gift. It always worked that way.

And tomorrow—unless the television speech produced results—everybody would forget.

I phoned Mary. She said she wasn't doing anything and would be glad to help. "You want to come over here, Pete?"

"The typewriter's here," I said. "I'll pick you up."

"Four blocks? Sit tight. I like to walk in the rain."

We worked. My eyes became gritty and my brain numb. Midnight passed. Across the table, Mary typed the final draft. I saw her stop and stifle a yawn.

"Is it that dull?" I asked.

"No." She paused and tucked the errant strand of hair in place. "I like it. It's sincere. Particularly . . ." She searched and drew out a sheet. "Here, where you say, 'We don't need a big brother telling us what to do. In this country we design our own patterns to live by.' And here, 'How many of you know someone who walks the streets today, a failure, because someone higher up said he could be allowed to succeed?' That'll hit a lot of people." She laid down the paper. "Every failure blames somebody else—but how did you know?"

"Intuition." I lit a cigaret and smiled. "Go on with the critique."

"Well . . ." She shrugged. "It's all good. I like it where you say,

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'Remember me, Peter Shepley.' You say it six or seven times. They should remember."

"Maybe."

She bent her head and resumed typing. I wondered what she'd say if she knew I'd angled for a spot on the ticket—and had thrown ten grand into the war chest—just to be seen by thousands of people at once. She'd probably understand; a fight for survival excused a few deceptions.

"You've helped a lot, Mary," I said. "I hope to repay you someday."

Her dark gray eyes met mine over the typewriter, just for a second. "If you win, I'll call it square."

I felt a twinge of guilt at involving her in a lost cause. "We won't win, Mary."

She stiffened, her nostrils flaring. "If you're talking about patterns again, Pete—"

"I'm talking about a platform—the one we don't have." I drew slowly on the cigaret. "To a voter we're nothing but do-gooders out to change things and that's not enough."

She gave me a level look, and I knew she was wondering whether or not I was serious. "You say that because you're tired," she said finally. She leaned back and stretched, pressing her palms against the small of her back. Lines of stress appeared in her white blouse, causing my mind to veer sharply from politics. Then she relaxed in an explosion of breath and looked at her watch. "Lord, it's three in the morning!"

"On April sixteenth."

"I'd better go, Pete."

But she only sat there, looking at me. I felt a faint tightening of my stomach, a slight quickening of breath. *Why not?* If life was to end, this would be a way to end it . . . turn off a few lights, open a bottle, tune in one of those programs that only played music . . .

Even as I thought it, I knew I wouldn't want it that way. To love tonight and be forgotten tomorrow would be merely ironic. I wasn't in the mood for irony. On the other hand, I wasn't in the mood to be alone at three in the morning, either. I felt tense and expectant, knotted up inside like someone watching a fuse burn toward a powder keg. I wanted company.

I looked at Mary, who was idly shuffling a new pack of my campaign cards. She flipped one over and traced the outline of my photo with an orange-painted fingernail. "Prosecutor," she mused. "You'd make a good one. Those black eyebrows give you a hard, penetrating look that makes me feel like signing a confession."

I spoke abstractedly, doodling on her shorthand pad. "I had a stomach ache when they took the picture."

"What happened to the diet you were on?"

"I quit a year ago."

"A year ago? That's when you

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took up smoking again, and got into politics. What happened?"

I didn't answer. An idea had flashed across the surface of my mind, then slipped back into the depths before I could examine it. I groped, mentally, but it remained just out of reach.

"Pete, what's the matter?"

Suddenly the idea lay on the surface, exposed in full view. It was a way to win the election—or several elections. It might not help me, but the rest of the group could use it. I slid the typewriter toward me and rolled in a fresh sheet of bond. Fatigue fell away as I typed, dissecting the thing that lay, shining and whole, on the surface of my mind.

I knew when Mary took my cigaret off the edge of the table and snubbed it out, but I didn't pause. I ripped out a full page and inserted a clean one, then another.

Once Mary spoke. Four pages later, it occurred to me that I hadn't answered. By then I couldn't remember the question.

It was like standing at the spout of a threshing machine. Words flowed into my mind. I scooped them up and threw them on paper. As the pile of papers grew, the idea eroded away, as though each word were a grain of sand being carried from a mound. When nothing remained, I pushed the typewriter away. I couldn't remember what I'd typed.

Mary set a cup of coffee before me. Steam swirled on its midnight surface like smoke on a polished table top.

"I never saw anyone work like that." There was awe in her voice. "You were vibrating like piano wire. I spoke, but I couldn't get through to you."

"Oh?" I felt limp and wrinkled, like an empty sausage casing. "What did you say?"

"Just . . . that it's wonderful! I read it as you typed it and it's a wonderful platform. It's more than that, it's a whole new theory."

I sipped the coffee and noted that the trembling of my hand produced ripples in the cup. I was tired; too tired to even pretend an interest in the thing I'd written. "What time is it?"

"Six-thirty. Pete, you could be governor if you follow this." Her face was flushed, her eyes shining.

I remembered that she was only twenty-two, and smiled.

"Seriously," she said, picking up the thirty-odd pages, "I've read Machiavelli. Compared to this, it's a high school civics theme. This is a work of . . . of *genius!*"

The word sent a coldness up my back, as though a window had been opened to let the lake wind blow in. I stood up and took the papers from her hand.

"What's the matter?"

"I have to destroy this, Mary."

"No!"

She reached for the papers, but I gripped her wrist. "There is danger here, more than you

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understand. If I burn this before they find out—"

"You throw away your chance to win. And the others' chances. Does the opposition frighten you that much?"

"The opposition! Mary, this theory probably belongs to a wandering Venusian named Blustpr who will dream it up five centuries from now."

Her face clouded with concern. "You're tired, Pete. Why don't you stay here and rest. I can go to the office, cut a stencil on this—"

"Wait! A stencil?" I considered it. It might mean that the Guardian would merely have to extract it, at the same time he extracted me. But maybe he couldn't do both at once. Maybe he'd have to choose, as a policeman chooses between a pair of fugitives who split up. "All right, Mary. We'll try it. We'll run off as many copies as we can, and give them to everybody we see."

I got the briefcase and stuffed the papers insdie. "But I'll carry them. I don't want to put you in the line of fire. Wait while I change and we'll go down to the office together."

Mary was asleep by the time I was ready. Her shoes lay beside the couch. Her silk-clad feet, one crossed over the other, rested on one arm of the couch. Her head was propped on the other, bent forward so that her lower lip pouted slightly.

"Let's go, Mary."

She stirred, but didn't wake up. I gripped her shoulder and shook her gently, then harder. She groaned deep in her throat, but slept on. Finally, I tickled the bottoms of her feet. That did it. She awoke like a cat, arching her back and stretching until her arms popped. Her eyes opened slightly, then flew wide. "Who are you?"

"Wake up, Mary. We have to go."

Her eyes covered the apartment in quick, frightened movements. "Where am I?"

"You've been dreaming, Mary. Wake up."

"Look, mister—" She sat up, and her throat convulsed as though she were trying to swallow a ball of cotton. "Just . . . tell me who you are and how I got here. Don't—" She swallowed again. "Don't just keep saying wake up, wake up, wake up—"

"Calm down, Mary. You've just forgotten." I sat on the edge of the couch and talked, slowly and patiently, the way you soothe a frightened horse. I exuded a mature calm as I explained who I was; but a rat-toothed question gnawed inside me: Would the Guardians now take Mary, because she'd read the theory?

Gradually, Mary's fear gave way to strained perplexity. "It's all wrong. You tell me I work for you, but I don't. I work for—" She squeezed her eyes shut for a minute, then opened them. "Funny . . . a second ago

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I knew his name, what he looked like, everything. Now I can't remember any of it."

"Look, Mary—" I grabbed her shorthand pad and showed it to her. "They say every steno has a personal shorthand style. Isn't this yours?"

She flipped the pages with a stunned incredulity, as though reading a report that Costa Rica had successfully invaded the States. Then she let the book fall and put her head in her hands. I thought she was crying, but her eyes were dry when she raised her head. "That's awful, Pete. To forget someone like that."

"You remember now?"

She nodded and swung her legs to the floor. She paused with her foot halfway in her shoe. "Who would think I could work for you so long, then just . . . forget?"

"Did you forget everything?"

"Just you . . . I think." Frowning, she stood and smoothed her skirt, running her palms down her thighs with fingers pointed inward. "Strange, I forgot you and everything connected with you."

"That's good. That means they're only after me."

"They? Pete, you said that before."

"Wait, I'll show you something." It was time, I thought; she'd believe me a little, now that she'd had an experience in forgetting. I opened the drawer into which I'd put the trial transcript, then my stomach tightened. The transcript was gone. I closed the drawer and faced Mary. "I can't prove it, Mary, but there's . . . a group after me. I can't go to the police—"

"You don't have to explain. I'm a Chicagoan."

If she believed it was a gang of hoods, I thought, it would serve the same purpose. The important thing was that only Mary—out of the thousands who had forgotten me—had remembered again. "Yes. Well . . . maybe they won't bother me while you're around. Will you stay close, just for awhile?"

"Sure," she said without hesitation. "Do we . . . stay here?"

"We go to the office." I picked up the briefcase. "I still mean to disseminate this theory."

Mary would admit no crisis great enough to send her to the Loop in a wrinkled blouse, so I agreed to stop at her apartment. At the parking lot, I discovered that my car keys were gone. The lot-keeper didn't remember me. Mary looked blank when I told her to identify my car. She'd forgotten what it looked like.

So we walked.

Halfway there, she started giving me puzzled, sidelong looks. I grabbed her hand and her puzzlement disappeared. We walked the rest of the way like two people who have just discovered they're in love.

At her apartment she went into her bedroom and started to close the door.

"I'd better go in with you," I said.

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She raised an eyebrow. "I thought you wanted to go to the office."

"I do. Why can't I—" My neck grew warm. "I mean . . . don't you have a screen or something?"

"No, I'm sorry." She smiled as she closed the door. "I'll be out in five minutes."

I stood at the door and heard rustling sounds on the other side. With each passing minute, my stomach coiled tighter. She stepped out fifteen minutes later in a green knit dress that did tingling things for her figure and her ash-blonde hair. She froze when she saw me.

"How did you get in?"

Lord, I thought, here we go again.

This time she was on home ground and hard to handle. I managed to talk her out of calling the police, then concentrated on filling up the huge gaping hole in her memory. She'd even forgotten about forgetting the other time. I gave her almost a day-by-day account of our four years together and wound up by telling her about the Guardians.

She accepted this, surprisingly. Maybe it was too fantastic for fiction.

"I remember you now, Pete, but you still aren't real to me. You're like someone I've read a lot about but don't really know. Pete . . . *what's going to happen to you?*"

"Nothing, Mary." I took her arm and guided her out the door. "Not if we stay together."

The elevator platform was full of commuters when we reached the station. As the train pulled in, I gripped Mary's elbow and watched them warily, especially the broad, squat females whose low silhouettes reminded me of T-34 tanks. I hadn't ridden the trains for years, but I had vague unpleasant memories.

Inside the car, I handed Mary to a seat beside the window and started to sit next to her.

"Hey, buddy!"

I straightened as though I'd backed into a cockleburr. With an agility that belied her dumpiness, a swarthy woman slid into my seat.

"I beg your pardon," I said. "This is my seat."

She opened her newspaper, chewing gum with a side-to-side motion. Mary looked out the window.

I smiled, though it hurt my face. "Do you mind? The young lady and I are together."

The woman elbowed Mary and cocked a thumb at me. "You know this guy?"

Mary regarded me with mild curiosity. "No."

"Mary—" She turned back to the window and I knew I'd lost her again. I bent and spoke to the swarthy woman. "Confidentially, the young lady is ill. A case of malignant incipient amnesia. I'm taking her to the hospital."

"Yeah?" Her mouth dropped open and I saw the wad of gum lying at the back of her tongue.

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Then she saw my briefcase and snorted. "Well, this is no ambulance—and you ain't no doctor."

She returned to her newspaper and renewed the attack on her gum. It sounded like a cow walking in sticky mud.

She kept it up all the way to the Loop. All the seats were full, so I clung to hers to be close to Mary. As the train neared our stop, I leaned over to nudge Mary. The trainman chose that moment to apply the brakes; I stumbled over a protruding foot and reeled forward. I was trapped for endless seconds.

When I stood up, the aisle was full. Mary's ash-blonde head tossed in the stream that flowed from the train to the escalator. I fought my way out of the car and up the escalator, leaving a wake of curses behind me.

I caught her at State and Madison and fell in beside her. "Mary—"

She turned, her eyes blazing. "Did you follow me from the train?"

"Give me a minute to explain, Mary." I caught her arm, but it was a mistake. Her right palm stung my cheek; the next moment she was striding down Madison with that tail-switching walk of peacocks and infuriated women.

I'd taken one step when, a large, meaty hand closed on my bicep. "Slow down, Romeo."

I jerked, then the arm was bent behind my back and my shoulder popped gently in its socket. "You like the trains, fella? Nice, crowded trains full of nice young girls?"

The heavy, teasing voice was enough, added to the creak and smell of leather. The law had me. "You've got it wrong, officer. Look . . . there's a bunch of campaign cards in my right coat pocket. They'll identify me."

He fumbled in the pocket, paused then loosed a loud, derisive laugh. "Yeah, they sure do." He pushed me toward a police car at the curb. "Let's go, joker."

He opened the door, shoved me in, and closed it. There was no inside handle, which was probably lucky for me. Running would have gotten me nothing but a bullet in the back.

I pulled out the packet of campaign cards. They were all blank. So were the identification cards in my wallet. Even the campaign button I'd pinned to my lapel showed a blank, enameled surface. A cold tingle started at the back of my neck and rolled down my spine. There'd be hell to pay at the station.

The door opened and the policeman peered in at me. "What you doing in there?"

"What?"

"You got a complaint or something?"

Lord, I thought, he forgot me while he walked around the car. "No, sir! I have no complaint."

"Then get the hell out. This ain't an air raid shelter."

I slid out and hurried away, free but dazed. The Guardian

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was moving faster. I ducked into a phone booth and called my firm.

The operator paused when I asked for my office, then said, "We have no Shepley here."

"Maud, listen—isn't this Rice, Shepley and Forsythe?"

"I'm sorry, this is Rice, Martin and Forsythe."

"Oh, for God's sake!" I tightened the screws on my self-control. "Look, Maud—my number is four eight nine. Will you ring it, please?"

A click, then Mary's voice came on, impersonal and efficient. "Mister Martin's office."

"*Martin!* Who the hell—? Mary, this is Pete. Peter Shepley."

"Mister Martin is not in. Did you have a message?"

"Mary, please try to remember. Where were you at three this morning?"

"Home in bed, if that's any of your business." Her voice was cold as Siberia and twice as remote. "I'll tell Mister Martin you called. Good-bye."

"Mary, help me—" The dial tone told me she'd hung up. I was wasting breath. I'd have to see Mary in person.

I burst from the booth and collided with a passing woman. Her features contorted in sudden rage. "Why don't you watch—!" Then, like a boiling pot removed from the fire, her features smoothed into vacuous tranquility. She walked on.

For a moment I stood there, feeling as though someone had dropped a scoop of ice cream down my neck. Then I started walking toward the office, my mind racing. In my apartment, it had taken Mary twenty minutes to forget me. In her apartment, ten to fifteen. On the train: two. The policeman: thirty seconds. The woman: about a second.

I broke into a trot. The past was going fast. In my mind's eye, I saw the Guardian following with a magic broom that swept away my footprints in time, drawing closer and closer to my heels.

I began to run. I had to reach Mary before he caught up.

I was crossing Wabash when the wind sprang up. It was a strange, silent wind that pressed my clothing against my body, but didn't stir the paper in the gutter. It seemed to blow on me alone.

I leaned into it and kept going.

A man wearing a Homburg walked straight toward me. His eyes seemed directed at mine, but they were focused on the distance. I stepped aside, but his shoulder brushed mine.

It was like the blow of a sledgehammer. I flew off the ground against a plateglass window. The briefcase flew from my hands, the catch opened, and the papers spilled out.

Homburg walked on as though nothing had happened.

I knelt in the strong wind and tried to pick up the papers. They were immovable, like sheets of

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rigid metal set in the sidewalk. And they were blank.

I rose and saw my image in the plate glass. I was a staring, frightened man with hollow cheeks and black, windblown hair.

Suddenly the image faded. I bent and touched my nose to the glass. I saw only the people walking along the sidewalk behind me.

I turned and shouted, but nobody seemed to hear. I shouted again, but the sound was flat. There was no echo.

Panic passed.

For a time I screamed, lunged at pedestrians and rebounded from their rigid bodies like a tennis ball from a stone wall. Then, as though strong hands had seized the reins of a plunging horse, I stopped.

I leaned against a building to think. The Examiner had said, "*He who disturbs the pattern loses his place.*" And my place, said the Guardian, was in the past. Then where in time was I now?

The present—of course! The present was a razor's edge separating the past and future. I must also be thin as a razor's edge; like a man cut out of tissue paper and seen from the side. I was nearly weightless because you had to have duration; invisible because I was briefer than light.

A humming, scraping sound jerked me from thought. Somewhere in the bowels of Chicago, the Illinois Central had opened a new can of commuters. They boiled up from underground like lava through a fissure. They filled the sidewalk and flowed toward me.

I ran.

On Michigan I nearly collided with another wave. They came on like an oozing monster bent on grinding me to pulp with their rock-like bodies.

I dived through a revolving door and careened into an office lobby. I should've stayed on the sidewalk. I bounced like a pinball caught in a maze of bumpers. An elevator door opened; people moved toward it like iron filings drawn toward a magnet.

I'd be mashed like a soft bug in there.

I reached the wall and found porous marble, with holes large enough for my fingers. I climbed above the crowd and flywalked to the door. Then I swung down and through the revolving gap.

I slithered across the sidewalk like a hog on ice, bounced off a car's hood and sailed into the hooting stream of traffic—straight toward a bus. I twisted and tried to change course. Suddenly a blast of wind caught me from below and threw me high above Michigan Avenue.

New knowledge came to me while I floated gently, ten stories above the ground. The blast which saved me had been the sun, reflecting off a slanted windshield. And the silent wind was not wind at all, but light—the long, visible rays of the sun.

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I began to lose altitude. I saw that I'd land near the center of Grant Park, Chicago's front lawn. I bent my knees, ducked my head, and watched the green expanse define itself into blades of grass.

I lit rolling, like a tumbleweed, and bumped gently against a tree. I stood up and wondered, what now? I looked across the park at the tall skyline, and the crowded sidewalks below. I couldn't go back among the people; they were my natural enemies.

I saw a man approach the park, crossing Michigan with the light. He swerved far out of the pedstrian lane to avoid passing near other people. He walked with a shuffle, leaning forward like a Neanderthal with a belly-ache.

A fellow victim! He seemed to see me—at least he was coming straight toward me, scowling like a man with a strong grievance. Well, if he were in my shoes I didn't blame him. I'd feel better, just knowing I was no longer alone.

He was about ten feet away when he charged, swinging. I caught his arms and held him away. "What's the matter with you?"

"This is your fault! I saw you flying up there and I knew it was your fault!"

"*My* fault?" I let him go, but he swung again. I caught his wrist. "Look, fella, you're all keyed up. We're both fish in the same kettle. Let's sit in the shade and trade information. Come on, relax and we'll talk it out."

He calmed down after I got him on the bench. He said he'd done nothing to deserve extraction; he'd distorted no patterns. Well, I asked, had he had a trial? No trial, he said.

Did he know where he was now? Yes, this was the present. His next comment jerked me upright. "The future is gone, now only the present exists for me. What misery!"

"Wait a minute . . . now, just a minute. You're from the future?"

"Of course. Where else would your pattern be?"

"*My* pattern?"

"Weren't you Peter Shepley?"

"*Was* I? Well, you could put it that way."

"Exactly, so there you are. Why shouldn't I be angry? I was your pattern, and I went ahead to show the way. You refused to follow. So we've both lost our places."

"Incredible!" I searched his face. The dark brows stretching in a narrow band above his eyes and nose—those were mine. The eyes, I saw, had once been dark and piercing; now they were clouded by defeat. The lines around his mouth were deeper and sharper. Otherwise it was the same face I shaved every morning.

I recalled the words of the Guardian: "*One part sees only the past; another sees only the future.*"

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"Can you see the future?" I asked him.

"I *remember* the future, as you remember the past."

"I mean . . . do you know whats' going to happen, before it happens?"

"Perhaps one-thousandth of a second before. Just as you perceive an event one-thousandth of a second after it occurs." He sighed. "Now I perceive in the past, just as you do. It's very awkward."

"Mmmm, yes. Tell me more. Maybe we can get out of this."

Talk seemed to lift his spirits. He told me to regard my life as a strip of material in the process of weaving. The woven part was the past, the weaving occurred in the present, the pattern extended ahead to the day of my death. I was the substance that filled in the design; he was the design. As I grew longer, he grew shorter.

Now, of course, both ends were gone. We stood together in the present, hanging by a thread —as he put it. His memory of the future no longer applied—

"You mean, your being extracted changed the future?"

"Where it concerned us, yes. For example, I visited our grave. Someone else was in it."

Just as someone else had replaced me in the firm. It sounded reasonable. "How old was I . . . you . . . we?"

"At the time of death? Forty."

"The hell! How?"

"Perforated duodenum. The old stomach wound."

Pain stabbed my stomach. "But the army said I'd never be bothered. They refused me disability."

"You should've stuck to antitrust suits and left politics to men with strong stomachs. Anyway it doesn't matter now. There is no future for us."

His resignation irked me. I wanted to fight. Even if it meant dashing my head against a wall, I couldn't sit and accept my fate.

He stiffened suddenly and pointed toward the lake. "Look!"

I followed the direction of his finger. "You're getting keyed up again. That's only fog, out on the lake."

"Fog! I never saw black fog before."

"It's gray, lumpy fog, like cold pork gravy."

"Black! It's black, like oil smoke!"

Something was wrong. I narrowed my eyes and studied the fog. It began abruptly about two miles out—a gray mottled curtain, so thick I could clearly see the port side of a passing tanker, while the starboard side was totally invisible. It stretched overhead and behind us, like an inverted gray bowl.

"It isn't fog," I said. "The sun is still shining."

"But I can't see the sun!"

"No, that means the . . . fog has something to do with our situation." I squinted narrowly. For a split second, the fog cleared, then it was back. My head spun and I wanted to crawl un-

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der the bench and put my arms over my head. "I know what it is. It's nothing."

He gave me a puzzled look.

"Pure, absolute nothing," I repeated. "We gave it a color value because our eyes couldn't accept a complete absence of color."

He squinted, then shivered. "It's closing in. What happens when it gets here?"

"I'll make a wild guess. I'd say that's the end of the present. When it gets here, we'll no longer exist in the present, past or future. It will be the end of us."

He sighed and settled back on the bench. "At least we won't just sit here and starve. There's some consolation."

I checked my watch as the fog consumed the port side of the tanker. I made a quick, mental calculation. "Twenty feet a minute. At this rate, we have more than ten hours to save ourselves. Any ideas?"

"You got us out of this. I'm afraid you'll have to get us in again." He sighed again. "We are of opposite natures, my friend. You have always regarded the future as subject to change, amenable to the influence of a strong determined man. I have always seen it as preset and immutable. I am—" He shrugged "—Incapable of original thought."

Despair settled over me like fine, gray dust. Instead of a partner, I'd acquired a dependent. I watched a scrawny yellow cat walk past our bench. At that moment, I'd have traded places with it.

The cat arched its back and hissed.

"Pattern! That cat saw me!"

"Cats are always seeing things," he said. "Maybe it wasn't you."

"It looked at me." I watched the cat walk on, switching its tail. Already it seemed to have forgotten us. "Cats have remarkably quick reactions, Pattern. Maybe that's why they can see us when people can't." I felt an idea taking shape in my mind. "Pattern, what time did you land in the present?"

"About six-thirty."

"That's when Mary forgot me the first time! But I made her remember again; twice more, in fact. So I didn't get here until two hours later!"

"Good for you," he said.

"Listen and you'll learn something." The idea was now wonderfully round and complete. "Here is how the Guardian pulled this extraction stunt. He started on me three months ago, yanking out material evidence that I'd left behind in the past—diplomas, old toys, articles I'd written, trophies I'd won. Simultaneously he erased me from the minds of my acquaintances.

"That . . . forced amnesia was the key gimmick, as I see it. If my folks remembered me as a baby, then I still existed in the past—even though my baby shoes might turn up missing. And Mary—I couldn't be extracted as long as I existed in

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her mind. Now they've reached the point where people see me with their eyes but not with their brains. They forget me before they become consciously aware of me."

"Except for cats."

"Forget cats. There's a damn sight more important exception."

"Oh?" He frowned and tugged at his lower lip, one of my own mannerisms.

"Subliminal perception!" I said. He gave me a blank look and I explained. "In subliminal advertising, they flash an image on the movie screen, maybe of somebody shoving popcorn into his mouth. It's so brief you're not aware of it. But the old subconscious sees it and first thing you know you crave popcorn."

"I see. So you'll hang around somebody—"

"*We* will." I stood up. "We'll hang around Mary, who may have some vestige of memory hidden in her mind. If we can make her see us, we'll have our foot in the door of the past."

He didn't move. "They'll just drag us out again."

I pulled him to his feet. "If they do, we'll try something else."

We left the haven of the Park, shuffling across grass that was stiff under our feet, as though caught in a quick freeze.

The Loop was still murder. Coffee breaks filled the sidewalks with hurtling projectiles in peoples' clothing. Elevators and lobbies were still death traps, especially for Pattern, who panicked in crowds.

I thought of climbing the fire escape to our tenth floor office, then remembered the suite was air-conditioned. Mary's window would be closed.

At noon I saw her walk across the lobby, a quietness of green and ash-blonde between two talking, laughing girls. I followed, feeling a warm nostalgia for her, as for an old friend I hadn't seen in weeks.

Then Pattern shouted behind me. A phalanx of four girls was pushing him toward the door of a crowded snack bar, like waste before a broom. I reached the door first and pulled him out.

Pattern panted an apology. "I'm sorry. All my life I've seen things before they happened. Now—"

"You can't help it." I looked around, but Mary was gone. I was sure that Pattern would never survive an afternoon in the Loop. "Let's go wait at her apartment."

We caught a nearly empty train, courtesy of the Chicago Transit Authority. As we rode north, I studied the lake through gaps between buildings. The fog was closer, but still more than a mile from shore.

In the hall outside her apartment, we sat on the worn carpet and waited. About four, Pattern said, "Suppose she has a date and doesn't come home?"

"She always comes home after work," I said. But the thought

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nagged me; she'd always come straight home because she rode with me. Now that routine was broken. An hour passed, and the worry grew into a fierce hatred for the unknown man she might be dating; he could touch her and I could not.

At six, the elevator clanked and Mary walked down the hall embracing a bag of groceries. She unlocked the door, looking through me and beyond me, then she went inside with the groceries and left the door ajar.

I pushed Pattern inside and followed. "Stay in her field of vision, as near as you can to what she's looking at."

"What will you do?"

"The same. We look alike, and it'll double our chances."

We followed as Mary took off her coat and kicked off her shoes. We knelt before her as she sat on the bed to remove her stockings. She stroked them down with the heels of her hands. Then she slipped her feet into mocassins and started unpacking the groceries.

It was nearly impossible to anticipate her. She had a way of pausing now and then, her small hands folded, while her eyes mapped out her next series of actions. Then she moved quickly, without waste motion. Pattern and I danced about like two ballerinas trying to catch the director's eye.

When Mary started supper in her tiny kitchen, Pattern began to breathe heavily. He kept getting caught between stove and table, then Mary would turn and dash him against the sink or the refrigerator. Once she flipped a cloth and knocked him over the table. He stood up with a wild, trapped look in his eyes.

"Stay there," I told him. "I'll handle the roving job."

It was torture to watch her set out the food—buttered peas, mashed potatoes with a pat of butter melting in the center, a breaded veal cutlet with golden flakes, and ice cream topped off with strawberries.

"Is she having company?" asked Pattern.

"No, there's only one setting. She just likes to cook."

She also liked to eat, and her quiet enjoyment reminded me that I hadn't eaten since the night before. I watched her drink milk, leaving a tiny white moustache on her upper lip. I stuck my finger in her glass, but the milk was solid.

After supper, she did the dishes and sat down to read. I knelt on the floor and rested my chin on the magazine. Her eyes —long-lashed and splintered with black and silver—moved quickly from side to side as she read through me.

Pattern peered over her shoulder. "Any sign she sees you?"

"She won't realize it," I said, until her subconscious tells her."

Suddenly she jumped up and turned on the TV. As she tuned, I remembered the speech I'd staked my hopes on. I'd been replaced by a man who looked and

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talked like a political science major—long on words and short on meaning.

"I wonder," mused Pattern, "where your replacements come from."

"I wondered too," I said, "until I remembered this Martin she thinks she's been working for. He was a clerk in the office. No doubt he believes now that he's held my job all these years. If the Guardian can remove memory, no doubt he can also implant memory."

The phone rang and Mary answered. From this end, I gathered that someone wanted to see her that night. She said she had a headache; then said she also expected a headache Saturday. He seemed to persist, and her voice grew chilly around the edges. "From now on, Mister Martin, what I do outside the office is my affair."

There was a grumbled reply and I saw Mary's mouth tighten. Her voice cut like a knife. "I'll come and get my things tomorrow. Leave my check on my desk. Good-bye."

She dropped the receiver and Pattern nudged me, his eyes shining. "We're making progress."

"You're supposed to be the cynic, not me. What progress?"

"She's aware of you. Why else would she break off with the guy, after dating him for weeks?"

"They'll make up tomorrow," I said.

"Look at her, she's still mad. If she'd loved the guy, she'd be bawling now."

Mary stood up and walked toward the bathroom, her fingers busy at the zippers of her dress. Pattern, sudden agile, was on her heels.

I hung back, trying to resolve the conflict within myself. During adolescence, I had daydreamed about being invisible, standing backstage at the Follies Burlesk, visiting the shower room of the WYCA . . . Now I felt like a Peeping Tom. A girl deserved *some* privacy, even in a struggle for survival.

I reached the bathroom as she stepped under the shower. "Don't look at her," I told Pattern.

He looked surprised. "Our ten hours are nearly gone."

I glanced at my watch; he was right. We couldn't break contact now. "Well . . . stop quivering and step back. She can't see you with soap in her eyes."

I didn't feel comfortable again until she'd put on pajamas and housecoat. She toured the apartment picking up magazines; adjusting pillows. Her face was thoughtful; her movements graceful, as though she carried a book on her head. Her hair caught the light in fluffy, glowing waves. Both color and curl, I knew, were natural.

She sat at the kitchen table and wrote in her diary. I stood across from her and read upside down:

"Quit job tonight. Don't

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know how I've stood Martin as long as I have. Don't even know how he's held the job he has. Accidents occur. Other things have gone askew to wit: Our city attorney candidate showed up on TV with two left feet and stuck both in his mouth. Can't imagine why I was rooting for him—but that ended tonight.

"One thing was good, miraculous even . . . a cashier's check made out to me for $138,000. Found it folded in my purse, took it to the bank. They confirmed the signature and the other rigamarole—but had no record of the transaction, even though there was exactly that amount of money unaccounted for in the cashier's box. So I'll get the money—question is, Who gave it to me and why? I keep expecting the joker to turn up."

I hope he does, I thought. Then I became aware of a change in the sounds of the city. "Pattern, do you hear anything?"

He cocked his head and listened. The silence swelled like a beige balloon, so thick I could hear the faint sound of Mary's ballpoint and the muffled swish of Outer Drive traffic.

"I don't hear anything," said Pattern.

"That's bad. We're only three blocks from the CTA tracks and I haven't heard a train for twenty minutes."

"Oh." His face looked sunken. He lowered his head, then stiffened: "Look there! Look what she's writing!"

I looked:

"I feel restless, jumpy tonight, like a kid on hot sand. Do you realize I'm 22? Time, mother would say—but tonight I suddenly realize what kind of man I want. Maturity, that's essential. Tall, not too slender, with a strong face and dark eyebrows that make him look a little grim. He's idealistic but not naive, realistic but not cynical. Right now I can see him in my mind's eye—yet he seems impossibly remote."

The diary deepened my unease, but Pattern looked at me as though he'd found a pearl in his oyster. "That man she described—that's us!"

Mary stood up and started into the bedroom. Pattern moved to follow, but I caught his arm.

"Let her go. It isn't working right."

"But it's only a matter of time!"

"No, her subconscious garbled the message. She regards me as an ideal; not as a reality." I pulled at my lower lip. "I'd have expected it if I'd thought longer about that subliminal popcorn deal. Those people didn't realize they'd seen popcorn. They only knew they wanted some."

Pattern looked stricken. "Now what?"

"I've got to communicate di-

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rectly; somehow, I have to let her know I really exist."

The silence deepened suddenly, as though someone had turned off a radio.

Pattern jumped. *"What was that?"*

"The Drive," I said. "It's two hundred yards away."

Pattern chewed his lower lip. "How long?"

"About fifteen minutes." I thought hard; so hard I began to sweat. It oozed from my pores and clung to my face in weightless drops. I wiped my face with my index finger and flicked it off. A drop landed on the open diary. It stood for a moment, a perfectly round globule, then it broke and spread over the paper.

I stared at the paper; *the perspiration had dropped into the past!* That meant that whatever left my body returned to the past, things like the briefcase, perspiration, falling hair, nail clippings . . .

My fingers shook as I pulled off the blank campaign button and jerked the pin from the plastic. I straightened the pin and tried to jab it into my index finger.

"What are you doing?" asked Pattern.

"I'm after blood. Here, stick this into my finger so it'll stay."

Puzzled, he grasped the pin and speared the finger. I gasped as it scraped the bone. Blood flowed from the puncture and formed a globule where the pin entered my finger. It oozed down the wire, dropped off, and splashed onto the table.

I drew the wire slowly across the diary. It dried into a broad, spattery line, as though written by a nervous old man using a blunt, leaky pen.

"Clever," breathed Pattern. "Very clever."

I began writing, slowly and painfully:

> "Mary, I am Peter Shepley. You have forgotten me, though you once knew me well. Death closes in as I write. It is a strange kind of death, without sound or coldness. It lacks even the comfort of familiar things; the smell of medicines and the hushed voices of relatives. It is a death you can prevent. Remember me, Peter Shepley. Remember the man who drove you home each evening; remember the last Christmas—"

Pattern stirred restlessly. "Are you going to write down everything you did together? We hardly have the time."

"Just a few incidents scattered over the years," I said. "Somewhere I may strike a memory that still exists." I went on writing, but his breath on my neck distracted me. "See what she's doing."

In a minute he returned, his voice heavy with concern. "She's reading in bed. How'll you get her in here?"

"I'll leave a trail of blood. You keep an eye on the fog."

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His footsteps moved away and I went on writing. It wasn't easy. The blood flowed unevenly and often coagulated before it reached the end of the wire. Sometimes I had to wriggle the pin to make the blood flow. Each time the point scraped the bone of my finger, pain flowed up my arm and gathered in my armpit. But I had to keep at it.

After five minutes, Pattern's taut voice came from the window. "It's slowing down, but still coming. I can see it down the alley."

I tried to hurry, but couldn't. My body was a reluctant fountain.

Pattern spoke again a minute later. "The elevator's stopped clanking. And I can't see the ground anymore!"

I sensed panic in his voice. "We're on the fourth floor," I said.

He left the window and paced the room like a nervous tiger. I tried to recall other experiences with Mary. There was a business trip to Milwaukee two years ago, and the side tour to the breweries—

Pattern breathed on my neck. "Are you about finished?"

"See where the fog is."

His breath left my neck. "Outside the window. The building across the alley is gone."

I wrote faster. A moment later, he shouted from the bedroom. "My God! She's asleep!"

I cut it short, remembering how soundly she slept: "—*You lived these things with me, Mary. Remember them. Remember me, Peter Shepley.*"

I walked into the bedroom trailing blood on the floor. Pattern stepped back from Mary's bed and watched me as a relative watches a doctor.

She lay back against a pillow, an open book in her lap. Her long lashes lay on her cheeks; her breasts rose and fell evenly beneath the pajamas. I raised my finger and let blood spatter on her face.

She frowned. She rubbed her face and smeared it with gore. But she didn't open her eyes. I wriggled the pin and the drops fell faster.

"The fog is behind you," said Pattern in a dry, cracked voice. "It's swallowed up the other room."

I darted a glance behind me. In place of the wall was a rounded expanse of gray fog. "Stay close to me," I said. "I seem to be the center of it."

"But the diary's in there!"

"Stay here! You can't touch it!"

I looked down at Mary. My blood had run off her face and gathered into a thin red stream that disappeared down the valley of her bosom. She moaned, then rolled over and embraced the other pillow. Her lips formed the word, *Pete*, then she subsided into sleep.

The fog was only a yard away, and Pattern pressed against me. I felt no fear; only an infinite regret. I ran my free hand

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across Mary's hair. It felt like fine wire.

Pattern screamed. I felt the end of pressure and knew that he was gone.

I bent to kiss Mary. Her lips were like stone, warmed by the sun. Then the fog filled my eyes and throat and I began to float.

I'd been wrong about the fog. It wasn't the end; it was endless. I floated for a dozen lifetimes with the fog pressing against my eyes, and I forgot I'd ever done anything else.

A hand gripped mine and jerked me upward. I sprawled on a smooth, glassy surface and stood up in clear air. I turned to the man who'd rescued me.

"Pattern! How long have you been here?"

"Years . . . centuries." He shrugged. "Maybe no more than a second. Time has no meaning here. We're outside it."

I gazed around a landscape so smooth and featureless that the horizon might have been a hundred miles away—or a hundred feet. I was standing on the edge of a chasm. Three feet below, the fog began. Now it looked solid, like dirty, frozen slush. Down there, where I came from, is time?"

He nodded. "All the centuries of eternity, frozen beneath the fog like a toy landscape. Walk that way—" He pointed to my left. "—And you'll find the time of your death." He pointed to the right. "That way, and you could witness your birth—that is, if you hadn't been extracted. You're out of it now."

"Out of it," I repeated. "Then the diary didn't work?"

"I guess not." His voice held a touch of regret. "Turn around and meet your fellow exiles."

I turned. They'd come from somewhere; twenty men and women. Ten sets of twins. Past and future, I thought; *me and my Pattern* . . . "I thought there'd be more."

A seven-foot giant stepped forward. "There are thousands, nearly a million of us." He stroked a purple beard as he talked. "We are what you would call the . . . escape committee. You—and your pattern—were our latest hope for escape. Now you are merely our latest failure."

I didn't like being mere, but I held my tongue. There were too many things I didn't know—and I said so.

"What you don't know," said the giant, jerking a sausage-sized thumb at his chest, "Horg will tell you. Who are the Guardians, you ask? They rule the universe at some time in the future. They patrol the past to make sure nothing thwarts their destiny. That is all we know."

"They seem a clerkish, doctrinaire race to rule the universe," I said.

"That they are, friend, that they are." Silver hoops swung from his ears as he nodded. "Nevertheless, they control the rift. They can revise the past as easily as a man in your time could edit a reel of film,

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and there are billions of them—over there."

He pointed across the frozen fog. I could make out the far edge of the rift, perhaps fifty miles away. Extending back from the edge were vast installations, looking like lines drawn on paper.

"Formidable," I said. I walked to the edge of the chasm and teetered thoughtfully. The purple-bearded man came to within three feet of the brink, but the others stayed back. "Tell me," I said, "how was I involved in your escape plan?"

"First, understand that we exiles are all of Earth origin." The giant's wave included all the featureless landscape. "We thought that if we introduced huge anachronisms into Earth's past, the Guardians might cut Earth from their pattern—as your film editor would cut out a badly damaged section of film. But only an idea could penetrate the fog, with the aid of our telepath, Bolin." He pointed to an old, white-haired pair at the rear of the group, who anointed me with faded smiles.

"So my flashes of genius were your ideas?"

The bearded giant frowned, as though annoyed at the interruption. "Yes. We chose your period as the most dynamic; the most sensitive to change. We chose you as a man of intelligence who wasn't a woolgatherer; one who would act on an idea immediately. We gave you ideas which were to overturn the worlds of the future. Maran there—" He pointed to a squat, shaven-headed pair. "—was a former technician who gave you the interspatial drive, while you repaired your bicycle. And I, as Sardok's chief of plans and training, gave you the Sardok tactic when you were about to be obliterated by your opponents in—"

The sallow telepath spoke. "You see, I could only reach you when you were receptive to a particular idea."

"Don't interrupt, Bolin," growled the giant, without taking his eyes off me. "You received the concept of political dominance from Arval, who had formerly taught it to her students."

I looked at the women he indicated. They were six-foot beauties, clad only in waist-length red hair which they kept parting and stroking with long, white fingers. "You used me after the trial? You knew I'd be extracted."

The giant narrowed his eyes. "We knew—and we wanted to see if you could distort the pattern in your struggle to escape."

I looked around at their faces, hating them for a moment. But they had an aura of defeat, common to most prisoners, which made hatred impossible. "Why are you so certain I failed? I left a message, written in blood."

One of the red-haired women answered, stroking her cheek with a plume of hair. "You are

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here, Peter Shepley. That is proof of failure."

The giant waved at the chasm. "If you had succeeded, there would have been a flaw in the rift. There is none, as you see."

I looked past my feet at the gray, frozen fog. "Suppose one jumped. Would he descend?"

The giant nodded. "A deranged few have jumped. Bolin reports that they are still there, walking in the fog throughout eternity. They can neither return here, nor enter there. Occasionally they are seen and heard by time-bound people, who then report to a psychiatrist, or go through life believing in ghosts. The jumpers accomplish nothing."

The woman spoke, spreading the hair across her breasts like a red curtain. "It is better here, Peter Shepley. We don't feel hunger, cold, or pain. There is only boredom, and for that there are . . . diversions."

"Diversions?" I studied their faces, realizing why they devoured me with their eyes. Mine was a new face, and they were starved for something new. "Escape plans are a diversion, aren't they? You don't really want out. General Horg, fearless leader—you're willing to try anything as long as it involves small citizens like Peter Shepley and no risk to yourself. You're only prisoners, playing prisoner games to pass the time!"

The giant's beard jutted. "The Guardians don't play games."

"Guardians! They're only clerks, small-minded creatures who run the office while the boss is away. Why are we the only race in exile? Don't you suppose they destroyed the other races they extracted? Would they exile us if they could destroy us? I say they can't destroy us!"

The giant pulled his beard, his mouth twisted in a smile. "To the world, you never existed. Isn't that destruction enough?"

"Damn the world! To myself I have always been and still am Peter Shepley, in time or out of time!" I paused to catch my breath. "Who really wants to escape? Step forward."

Only Pattern—my Pattern—stepped forward. The woman spoke, her fingers parting the red curtain. "Perhaps, if I knew your plan . . ."

"To live," I said, "it is sometimes necessary to risk life. My plan is just to jump. If a thousand, a million of us, were to land in 1960, wouldn't that distort the pattern beyond repair?"

The entire group drew back a step from the edge. The red-haired woman smiled sadly. "In that case, good-bye, Peter Shepley."

Pattern hesitated, pulling at his lip.

"Pattern, are you with me?"

He shook his head. "I think . . . it is better here."

I turned my back on them and jumped.

The thick surface of the fog sagged like a trampoline when I hit it, then I broke through and

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began falling in the smothering grayness. Eternity passed. Falling became a mode of life, and I slept . . .

When I awoke, the floor was hard—wonderfully hard. I had weight again.

I lifted my head and saw the door opening to Mary's kitchen. The trail of blood was gone; so was the diary I'd left on the kitchen table.

I stood up, and I felt like dancing. I was back! I looked down at Mary, who still slept, hugging the pillow, just as I'd left her. The springs creaked as I sat on the bed, and Mary opened her eyes.

"Pete! Oh, darling!" She rolled over and put her forehead against my chest. "I had a terrible dream!"

Her hair was soft, silky. I felt content to sit there and feel it against my palm; to enjoy the pressure of a body that was once again soft and resilient. "Tell me about the dream, Mary."

"Well, there was blood in the dream. All over my face, down my pajamas, in a gruesome trail that led to the kitchen table. My diary was there, open. Funniest thing about the dream, I'd forgotten all about you. Everything!"

"Fantastic," I said, looking down. Her orange lips were touching my light blue pajamas. *Pajamas?* But I'd been wearing a gray business suit . . .

"So there were these clues in the diary, like, oh, Who drives me home from work? Whose favorite song is 'Deep Purple'? Whose favorite sport is handball? I didn't have to guess your name, what I had to do was remember you, all about you, and oh, you've had those dreams, Pete, where you felt a terrific compulsion about something? Well, in this dream I had to remember you or you just wouldn't be here anymore."

"Crazy," I said. I reached for a cigaret, then froze. On my third finger, left hand, was a plain gold band . . .

"But I remembered, clear back to the time you hired me, a nervous eighteen year old right out of business school. Remember? You thought I was too young, and you kept me in suspense for years while I watched for signs that you noticed me; the way you touched my hands when I gave you a file, the way you said good morning . . ."

A photo rested on the night table. Mary looked lovely in her wedding dress, her arm linked to mine. I appeared somewhat smug and fatuous, as bridegrooms often do—but the retoucher had done a wonderful job. I looked handsome, virile, and ten years younger . . .

"I didn't even know you liked me," Mary went on, "until the Christmas you gave me the perfume. And I had to rush out and buy a cigaret lighter for you. And I remembered that time in Milwaukee, in the brewery, the first time you kissed me . . ."

"Oh, yes. Did I?" I lit a ciga-

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ret and drew slowly. It was fantastic, the way Mary's memory was half-fact, half wish-fulfillment. For example, I had *almost* grabbed a kiss that time in Milwaukee, but marriage . . . Well, she'd idealized me in her memory, and no man was truly ideal to a woman until he was hers, to have and to hold. "Let's see, Mary, how long have we been married?"

"You're teasing, Pete." Her small fist thumped my chest. "But seriously, don't you think a week is long enough to keep it a secret, even if one of us has to leave Rice, Martin and Forsythe because of that silly rule about husband and wife—?"

"Rice, Martin and—!" I sat up straight. "Do I happen to be chief clerk?"

"Certainly, Peter. What's the matter?"

I ran my fingers through thick, wavy hair. Naturally, when they stuck Martin in my place, that left a hole where Martin had been. And I was in it now. "I guess I've been dreaming, too, Mary."

A dream? Could it have been? My stomach felt good now; the gnawing pain I'd lived with for eight years was gone. I slid off the bed and stood up, running my palm across my stomach. The puckered scar was missing; I felt only muscles, ridged and hard.

"Mary, did I ever tell you about my wound?"

"No, were you wounded?"

"No," I smiled. "Not if you don't remember." I walked before the mirror and whistled when I saw my body. Slab-like shoulders tapered down to hips as thin and lithe as a bridge cable. I bent my arm and the bicep bulged against my sleeve.

"Pete, when you're through posing, someone's at the door."

"Door?" I hesitated, then realized I was the man of the house. I'd been married a week, and never consciously slept with my bride. I opened the door, determined to brush off the caller.

I gasped. "Pattern! How did you get here?"

He stood in the door, shifting his weight. "I jumped . . . after Bolin, the telepath, said you'd made it. But yours was the only hole so I landed here and I wondered if you could help . . ."

"Find a spot for you? Sure!"

"Yes . . . well, thanks, but I'm sort of a spokesman—"

I became aware of a rumbling sound in the street. It sounded like logs rolling down a mountain, broken by the occasional shriek of shattering glass. I ran to the window and looked out. The Exiles packed the street from side to side—all twins, bearded, shaven-headed, some dressed in fantastic costumes, some in no costumes at all, like the red-headed woman who was attempting to climb a pole.

They filled the street as far as I could see, their faces turned toward my window like flowers toward the sun. In the distance, I heard police sirens. . . .

THE END

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THE RADIO

If O. Henry had written science fiction, chances are he would have written this story, with its "O. Henry twist" ending.

By
PETER ARTHUR

I'VE thought it over, and decided to tell you the truth. Certainly I refused to give the police a statement. What could I tell them—the truth, too? They'd think I was crazy. And what would be the point in a false explanation? It was a case of the truth or nothing, so I kept still.

But you—you're my lawyer, and a man of education. Imagination, too, I hope, or this will be a complete waste of time. It's not the verdict, you understand; that doesn't worry me. A drowning man doesn't fuss over the fact that salt water stings his eyes. I've lost too much to care about prison.

All right; I know you're a busy man; I'll get to the point.

I was listening to the World Series. She—my wife—was in town, shopping. You remember the Series. It was three and three. Seemed important then. Now—but skip it.

It was the third inning of that seventh game. The Dodgers had one man on second, two out; and the count on Snider was three balls. Neither team had scored yet. A good game. And then the damn TV conked out. The screen just went black. The only thing I know how to fix is the fuse, and that wasn't the trouble. I tinkered a little; opened the back; tightened the tubes—nothing. I was plenty teed off. The set was almost new; had cost a bundle; and it had to pick a time like this to quit. Funny how serious little things can seem until you know better. A person doesn't know what real trouble is, yet he carries on as if the world was ending. So I couldn't watch the game—was that so dammed important?

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Anyway, there I was, stuck without a set. On a Sunday, so no repair shops open even if there'd been time. And you know my place, well out of town, on the El Toro Road. Twenty miles from nowhere. No neighbors I could watch with. I wanted to boot that lousy TV.

Then I remembered there was still such a thing as radio. Funny thing, though, I didn't know for sure if we even had one in the house. We hadn't listened for years. Still, it was a chance, so I searched the place. I found a portable in the spare bedroom, but it was kaput, like the TV. Probably hadn't been used for ages.

I was about to give up, when I suddenly remembered my Dad's old set—up in the attic. Nobody'd given it a thought since he died in 1935. There was just a chance it might still work; they built 'em to last in those days.

I hurried up to the attic, and sure enough, there it was, dusty and rickety—an old Atwater-Kent, remember them?

Well, I lugged it down. It had one wobbly leg, weighed a ton, and looked a hundred years old; but when I plugged the thing in, it actually worked. It had a weak, far-away sound when you tuned in, but perfectly clear. After thirty years, it played.

But when I got the old set tuned in on the game, I was mighty puzzled. It hadn't taken more than twenty minutes to find the radio, yet instead of being in, at most the fourth inning, they were in the last of the fifth.

It didn't seem reasonable, not in a World Series, where everybody takes his time, and is careful as hell. I wanted to know what I'd missed anyhow, and as usual in that case, the announcer talked about everything else, including the heights and weights of the players' grandmothers. So I phoned Jerry Martin. It didn't take him long to straighten me out. Said I was nuts. Certainly it was only the last of the fourth.

It's the truth; I can't help it. Tha's the way it was. That old set was exactly one hour ahead of the rest of the world! Don't look at me like that. I know it sounds crazy. Bu I can only tell you what happened. I'll take a lie detector test any time you say.

I didn't believe it myself, at first. But it was an easy thing to verify. I just took the radio schedules from the paper, and tuned in a dozen or so programs. Each one came on about an hour ahead of the usual time.

Well, I spent the rest of that afternoon in a daze. I knew an hour before Jerry that my bet was safe—that Los Angeles had won. I had crazy, wild dreams

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of money to be made on races, stocks, politics—even had ideas of doing a TV broadcast involving predictions: the old Drew Pearson gimmick, but with one hundred per cent accuracy.

I didn't even wonder how Dad had done it. If he hadn't died so suddenly from that heart attack, I suppose he'd have told us plenty. As it was, the set rotted in our attic for thirty years. Now I'd be damned if anybody else would ever get it from me. Maybe the scientists could improve it; get farther into the future, and all, but my exclusive would be gone. No, I was better off with my one hour for myself.

Time began to drag about four, because I was anxious for Stephanie—my wife—to get back, so I could tell her the incredible, wonderful news. We share—shared—everything.

At five she was still out, and I was listening, in a dreamy sort of way. It was one of those nauseating programs where they set up a mike and buttonhole people going by. This was in front of a drugstore in town, one of those Hollywood places where stars are supposed to pop in. They were questioning some giggly dame they'd stopped, when all of a sudden there was a flock of excitement. A car had swerved up on the sidewalk, and hit a woman.

Naturally, they couldn't or wouldn't identify the victim on the air—some FCC rule, I suppose. But they bore down on the incidentals: how the driver looked like a maniac or drug-fiend; that the woman had been knocked out of her shoes, and lay there in her stocking feet. Her purse had been tossed near the mike, and the announcer couldn't resist describing that—a green plastic bag with a chrome monogram, SDR. When he said that, I was sick. There couldn't be two such purses, and I knew immediately that the woman was Stephanie.

Sure, I know you don't get it. Sounds completely impossible; but this is exactly the way it happened, I tell you.

I sat there stunned, nearly out of my mind. I love—loved—my wife, and now she—but I didn't know, for sure, then. There still seemed to be hope—time. You see, I remembered that my radio was still an hour fast. The accident hadn't actually happened yet!

Don't you see? There was a chance—a good one. If only I could get there in time. Head Stephanie off a block down, or stop the car that was going to hit her.

When the idea struck home, I jumped up. That's when I bumped the radio. The weak leg broke, and the whole thing

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crashed. If the set was only still working, you'd know I wasn't lying.

But I had no time to bother about it then. I ran to my car, started up, and drove for town like mad. Usually it's a forty minute run on the freeway, but this was the rush hour. You know what it's like: bumper to bumper at twenty miles an hour. Could I ask a cop to rush me through? Tell him I was trying to prevent an accident fifteen minutes before it was supposed to happen?

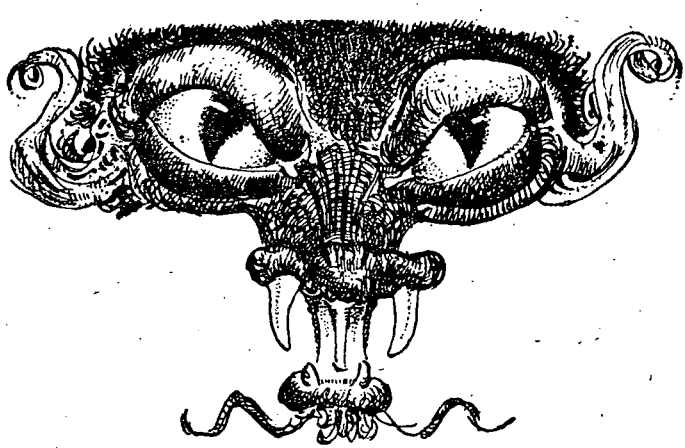
So it was damn near six ten before I got near that drugstore. Even then, I wasn't too clear about what to do. I hoped to catch Stephanie some distance off, and get her out of there.

My time was about gone, and I was in bad shape emotionally; sweat in my eyes; full of the shakes. I spotted an opening in the traffic, and stepped on the gas, heading for a parking space near the store. Then everything went wrong. That fool kid ran out into the street after his damned balloon, with his mother squawking behind him like an old hen.

What could I do? It's instinctive for a driver to avoid hitting somebody. I turned aside hard, and before I could stop, was over the curb, into the crowd, with something soft under my wheels.

I climbed out, scared and dizzy, but accident or not, worried about my wife first. The popeyed man by the mike was holding a green purse and shouting. Then I saw—in front of my car—and her shoes—you know the rest.

THE END



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According to you...

Dear Editor:

It has been, unfortunately, my experience to note that many readers of science fiction and fantasy have never heard of—or are very indifferent to—H. P. Lovecraft and his stories. I sincerely hope that the Moskowitz article, "The Eerie Life of H. P. Lovecraft" will persuade these readers to obtain and peruse his (Lovecraft's) works.

Mr. Moskowitz presents evidence by which he attempts to show that Lovecraft's works are largely "science fiction." I cannot agree with this. If the creatures Lovecraft describes in, say, THE DUNWICH HORROR actually *existed*, both science and the supernatural —as we understand them— would be shaken to the core.

Lovecraft's stories are, I think, to be favorably compared with any ever written in America, including the fine tales of Edgar Allan Poe.

I once read a collection of stories that were on a level with Lovecraft, Poe, Smith, and Derleth. The stories concerned Satanism, witchcraft, vampire-cults, strange dark gods of the desert, and the powers that these beings still hold in shunned vaults beneath Aegyptian antiquities. The book? The horror-classic THE OPENER OF THE WAY. The author? Robert Bloch. Mr. Bloch, please write such stories again!

George H. Wagner, Jr.
46 Harrison Avenue
Bellevue, Kentucky

● *Bloch does, but now they are called "Psycho" and made into movies!*

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Dear Editor:

It seems of late that *Fantastic* is developing in the tradition of the late, lamented *Unknown*. This, of course, is highly desirable, being that at present there are not any magazines devoted to fantasy in literature. I hope, though, that *Fantastic* does not try to duplicate *Unknown;* rather it would be a truly great idea to try a blending of the two main schools of fantasy (by that I don't mean develop a new field of fantasy, but use stories from both schools) indeed, a magazine using the approach of both *Weird Tales* and *Unknown* would be a potentially great magazine. True, H. P. Lovecraft, Robert E. Howard, Fletcher Pratt, Henry S. Whitehead and others are dead; and others are not now writing fantasy. But, major authors of fantasy such as Clark Ashton Smith, August Derleth, etc., are still potential producers of "great" fantasy. This is a big order, but get stories by them.

Still, you are publishing at present fine stories by Fritz Leiber, Jack Sharkey and Robert Bloch and that is something. Please more "ancient adventures" by Leiber.

You seem to be the one hope for new fantasy; how about working on the above authors?

Kirby McCauley
2407 3rd Avenue So.
Minneapolis 4, Minn.

● *Try to duplicate* Unknown? *Man, that would be blasphemy!*

● *Some comments on Sharkey the novelist vs. Sharkey the short story writer:*

Dear Editor:

I believe that in the July issue of *Fantastic,* you speculated on how the readers' opinion of Jack Sharkey's novel would compare with the reactions to his short stories. Since I first encountered a Jack Sharkey short story I have been a fan of his. Similarly, any other of his stories I have run across I have immensely enjoyed. However, having completed "The Crispin Affair" I found myself rather dissatisfied. I believe I have traced out the trouble (at least as far as I personally am concerned).

Now few readers can deny that Jack S. has a very witty style of writing. That's practially accepted dogma. However, over the span of a book-length novel, it wears somewhat thin. In a short story, there is no vital need to build up a character, to outline his personality; yet in a novel, I feel this is vital. The witty portions

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of "The Crispin Affair" are good. The plot, however is scanty, and as I have implied, the characters are too unreal. I think the fault in general could be summed up by one word, namely: overexposure.

There also seem to be a few loose ends that Mr. Sharkey left scattered over the copper-rich landscape and also, isn't it rather unlikely the way everything was so "neatly" wrapped up? For another author, I would say, It wasn't a bad effort, but for Jack Sharkey, he can do much better, I'm sure.

Anthony Ryan
2024 Bristol Ave.,
Stockton, Calif.

Dear Editor:

This being my first attempt at writing a letter of appreciation to a professional science fiction magazine, I felt it logical to write to the one which deserved the title of "best of its kind." Which, judging from such outstanding features as "The Man Who Wasn't Home" and the delightful irony of "And Peace Attend Thee," yours is.

Mr. Biggle has the rare ability to create a situation in which the reader feels sorry for his struggling hero, yet is loathe to see him surmount all obstacles and obtain idyllic happiness, for at that point the story must end. Now, if only he could be persuaded to contribute another story, as a serial, and tell us more about Sandler's "home life". . . .

Nevertheless, after such an excursion into the happy ending type of plot, one would have to be an incurable romantic not to appreciate the finesse of "Who Is Mrs. Myob?" or what I consider the number one selection of this issue, ". . . And Peace Attend Thee." Say, did you notice anything unusual about the look on the face of the gentleman on your cover?

Janice Brodsky
1814 North Evanston
Tulsa 10, Okla.

● *Unusual? You mean that invisible succubus perched on his nose?*

Dear Editor:

I've just read the August *Fantastic*, my first, and would like to express my appreciation for your obvious efforts in selecting mature and interesting stories. Of all the material I read, I believe sf

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can be one of the most interesting forms published, if all writers made the same effort as authors Robert Bloch and Robert F. Young. However, though others are involved, it is the editor who sets the standards that either make or break a mgazine. Judging from the August issue, I would say that *Fantastic* has it "made."

I am in accord with one of the August letters, however, that the cover of *Fantastic* is very much out of alignment with its contents. I would recommend replacement of the glossy cover, first and foremost, eliminate all pictures and concentrate on magazine title lettering and coloring. It was the word *Fantastic,* alone, that caught my attention, as I'm sure is the case with other readers, and I was sure that it would only be one more science magazine—which wasn't the case. I've read a lot and seen a number of covers and it is my opinion that *Fantastic* deserves better than the stereotype of cover it presently has. New readers will thank you for bringing the magazine to their attention—not to mention your sales department.

Kenneth J. McNatt
Little Rock, Ark.

● *Flash: a new kind of title will adorn* Fantastic's *January, 1961 issue.*

Dear Editor:

My personal Utopia? I'm in it. And I think a lot of other people are too if they could only realize it. You would, I bet, get tired of doing nothing but playing poker and reading, etc. out on a yacht and wish you had a magazine to edit and a few hardships to overcome. If I remain at all realistic I can't think of any change in my world that wouldn't change something else that I didn't want changed.

Frederick Norwood
111 Upperline
Franklin, La.

● *Oh-h-h, you're the* normal *fellow!*

Dear Editor:

Congratulations on another fine issue, referring to September. Another excellent cover, too. The recent run of covers has been very good, especially Nuetzell's "World Timer" cover for August. The artwork is getting progressively better.

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All the shorts in the September issue were from good to excellent, and Moskowitz came through with another interesting article. But let's face it: Moskowitz had a pretty lousy choice of subjects except for Gernsback and HPL. How about bringing Moskowitz back with such subjects as Burroughs and Merritt. And for an especially interesting article, get him to do one on the history of *Amazing Stories.* One complaint about the September issue: you Biggled away too much space on "The Man Who Wasn't Home." That story just didn't have what it takes.

Please, not too much fantasy or you'll lose me, and you wouldn't want to do that, would you?

Michael Padgett
3230 Washington Road
Augusta, Georgia

● *No.*

Dear Editor:

I was so thoroughly surprised to find that most all of your fans did not go for, "The Covenant. What happened all during the summer? Did most of your real-good authors take off on a long vacation or something like that? It rose, anyway. It has done even better than any other summer that I have ever known of *Fantastic Science Fiction.* I honestly do believe that it was due to the Jack Sharkey short stories and his, "Crispin Affair," serial. Anyhow, I bet this confession from an old fan is quite a real surprise, isn't it, and I bet that quite a few of my friends will think it is somebody else writing under the pen name of James W. Ayres.

James W. Ayers
609 First Street
Attalla, Ala.

● *Ok, we give up. Who are you? Probably Jack Sharkey.*

Dear Editor:

With the utmost regularity, your magazine is propagating blossoms of fruit in the likeness of talented authors and prodigious stories.

And do not deny that many of these burgeoning blossoms are venturing with both purpose and direction into the more prosperous crime fiction field. Among the versatile constituents of the August issue are Slesar, Porges, Biggle, and Garrett; all of whom

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have succeeded in storming the bastions and ramparts which thoroughly envelope the mystery field.

To those steadfast devotees of sf and mystery fiction—of which there are many—it would be a boon if a magazine could incorporate both sf and mystery as a general policy. But alas I fear that this is but a dream of a wretched fan.

The deplorable attitude that some of the fen have concerning fantasy in the contemporary realm of sf amuses me. Babbling coherently in letters to the editor, they complain with derision of the lack of fantasy and in the next breath plead with abject humility for more. Yet if they took time off from their prattling and importuning, they would most assuredly discover a moderate amount of fantasy in your publication.

Creation of characters—odd, macabre, and otherwise—has contributed much to the success of Henry Slesar in the mystery field. But it remains to be said that Mr. Slesar never really acquired a "name" for himself in sf. "Who Is Mrs. Myob?" is an indication of brilliant characterization and, a substantially weak plot.

I could have sworn profusely on a stack of dilapidated *Weird Tales* that the "lost" identity gimmick had been discarded with the maturing of sf. Ostensibly Lloyd Biggle has attempted a rehash; in fact, to my embarrassment, I enjoyed "The Man Who Wasn't Home." Must see the psychiatrist pretty soon if this is any way an indication.

"Shadowsmith" provides us with a conception of a conventional sf and mystery collaboration. Porges spews forth consistent sf and fantasy; "Shadowsmith" being no exception.

I present my condolences to Jack Sharkey; his work on "The Crispin Affair" must have diluted his cranial contents.

Garret's yarn was a masterful piece, having more appeal than his literary efforts which appear frequently in *Astounding*.

The series dealing with the all time greats in sf has been met with due approval: innumerable fans, I'm sure, would appreciate Moskowitz even more if he were to do profiles on coeval sf authors.

Glen Christianson
30012 Champine Dr.
St. Clair Shores, Mich.

● *Such a project is in the discussion stage, and we hope to have news about it for you soon.*

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Dear Editor:

The August issue was a considerable improvement over the last two. The cover was very good, but don't overdo these impressionist type things. How about doing more scenes from the stories?

The editorial was very good, for a change. My own personal Utopia? Well, I'd like a world inhabited by beautiful girls, hideous bems and good swordsmen (none of them as good as me, of course). The beautiful girl would be madly in love with me, but would always be carried off by the Bems or the swordsmen. Corny? Maybe, but I'd like it. And at least it wouldn't be boring, like the world described in Bloch's "The World Timer." This is one of the worst stories you've published for some time. In the first place, it was sf and should not have been in *Fantastic*. In the second place, the story was lousy. A long string of puns is not a good substitute for action or a plot. In the third place, Bloch's dreamworld is all wet; his stuff about "pure Biology" only shows his ignorance of the subject. Has he ever studied the family of a gorilla? His remarks about the "lower orders"—aside from the anthropoids their sex life is governed by glandular pecularities lacking in the higher types. All of the higher apes have families.

The Moskowitz article probably had the usual mistakes, though I'm not enough of an authority on Shiel to correct them—with one exception. He speaks of PICKMAN'S MODEL as "living in tunnels beneath New York." It so happens that PICKMAN'S MODEL lives in (or under) Boston, Mass. As for Heard, I disagree with some of the things Moskowitz says about his work, but that's a matter of personal opinion. To my mind, Heard is on a level with Stapleton.

"This One's On Me" was excellent. I'm glad to see Russell in *Fantastic* and hope you have more of his stuff. "The Crime of Mr. Sauer" was up to the standard we expect from Mr. Porges. "The House" was excellent, the best of the short stories.

"The Crispin Affair" was sf and should have been in *Amazing*. This was a good story, except for the ending, but either Mr. Sharkey is entirely ignorant of human emotions or else he is purposely falsifying those of his characters in order to mislead his readers. This makes the story very unrealistic.

How about getting Sharkey to do some serious-horror stories like he used to do? They were good.

Paul Zimmer
RD #1
East Greenbush, N. Y.

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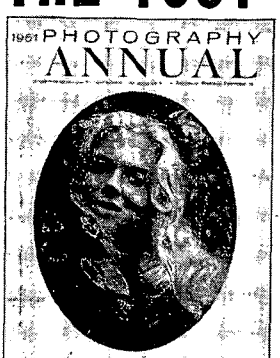

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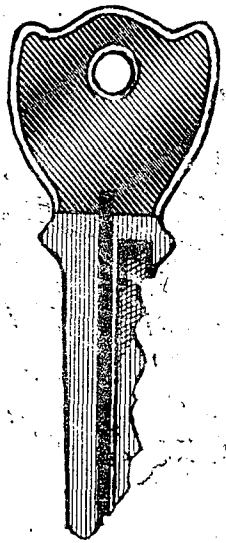

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